Courage and Truthfulness: Ethical Strategies and the Creative Process in the Novels of Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing and V.S. Naipaul.

by

Gillian Dooley, B.A. (Hons), Grad. Dip. Sec. Stud. (C.C.A.E.), Dip. Lib. Stud. (S.A.I.T.)

Department of English
Faculty of Education, Humanities, Law and Theology
Flinders University of South Australia

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Summary

The novels of Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing and V.S. Naipaul are studied in the light of statements they have made in essays and interviews regarding the ethical implications of writing fiction. The purpose of this research is to examine the nature of the problems they have identified in the creative process of writing and the strategies each has used to address the ethical problems they perceive, and to assess the relative success of their chosen methods.

It can be seen that, although for each of them the quest for truth is their highest concern, they have each developed very different ways of dealing with the problems they believe are connected with writing truthfully, and in addition, they have defined the particulars of these problems in different ways. It is concluded that the more carefully examined and individually defined these problems are, the greater the internal consistency and credibility which is achieved by the strategies they have developed to address the problems, and the more their work has developed in the course of their careers.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

…………………………………………….

Gillian Dooley

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Note on Referencing

Published interviews with Murdoch, Lessing and Naipaul are a major source of information for this thesis. Accordingly, to avoid confusion, MLA style has been adapted to the extent that the interviewer is treated as the author of each interview, rather than the interviewee.

In criticism there are indeed three individuals concerned: the artist, the work of art and the critic; and good criticism attends to all three. The good critic speaks as the intelligent, experienced individual, not as a sort of scientist, and he sees the work as an individual and as the product of an individual. He attends to both with open-minded seriousness, just as he would attend if he were attempting to assess an individual person in some other situation of importance.
… The critic is engaged as a whole man exercising many talents and many kinds of knowledge in the attempt to exhibit something densely concrete and particular to his reader. In doing this, he will use any effective means which he can muster. He may describe minutely or reflect on far off matters, theories, traditions, historical backgrounds. He may choose his methods of explanation, vary them and mix them, and we may note here that whatever terminology he may choose, it will only gain its full sense when spoken by him to his hearer in the 'presence', actual or well-recalled, of the object.
… Aesthetic critical language has a built-in ostensive particularity which makes it inimicable to quasi-scientific treatment.

Iris Murdoch. 'Structure in The Novel.' 103.

I think you should look at what a writer has to offer and take what is offered – not complain that he's not doing something else.

Doris Lessing interviewed by Earl G. Ingersoll. 232.

English lit. demands more that a mere knowledge of the texts, and a familiarity with the criticism of your text editor. You must do your own thinking about the books you read.
… thought is indispensable. You must realise in the first place what the writer set out to do. It is no use criticising a cricket reporter because he mishandles the report of Stollmeyer's wedding. Having found out the aim of the writer, ponder on the difficulties of the achievement, and then see where he has failed. For heaven's sake, don't behave like one of my colleagues here and assume that every eminent writer is a literary god, unapproachable and infallible.

V.S. Naipaul. Letter to his sister Satti, July 1st, 1952. *Letters Between a Father and Son.* 207-8

Introduction

The practice of writing fiction has always presented serious writers with ethical problems, which are frequently formulated as concerns to express reality or the truth with the greatest possible clarity and fidelity. Personal and cultural ideas of what constitutes realism or truthfulness naturally vary considerably, and the circumstances in which authors live and work – their geographic and historical situations, as well as their characters and artistic aims – will have a profound influence on the way each individual writer defines these problems.

There is an assumption that writers in the period following the Second World War are to some extent writing in a moral vacuum. D. J. Taylor, for example, claims that 'the early novels of [Kingsley] Amis and Wain show the enormous difficulty that post-war novelists have in writing about "moral issues" in an aesthetically satisfying way' (180), and that

> the writer who chooses to introduce a pressing moral element into fiction … does so in the knowledge that they will run up against some almost insuperable problems. Chief among these is the knowledge that we inhabit a society in which traditional Christian morality has become steadily eroded without anything tangible taking its place. (188)

'Traditional Christian morality', however, was not universally accepted in the Victorian age, as Taylor himself admits: 'God, of course, had been on the way out throughout the nineteenth century' (169). Many nineteenth century intellectuals and writers were not Christians in the traditional sense. On the other hand, although existentialism and the theatre of the absurd have made their mark on the post-war English literary culture, the sense of moral values in art remains strong, as is evident from the works of the three novelists included in this study.

These three authors have each articulated a number of ethical problems which they have identified in the practice of writing, and this thesis is an

examination of the means by which they have tried in various of their fictional works to overcome these problems. In this way, the agenda for the work is, at least in part, set by the authors themselves, as it focuses on issues they have each been preoccupied with, rather than taking a theoretical approach in which the critic makes all the decisions about the critical apparatus. However, this research will show that there is a direct connection between the accuracy of each writer's analysis of their situation and needs, and the consequent definition of their own peculiar set of ethical problems, and the success with which they are able to develop strategies which give their fiction internal consistency and credibility, and to fulfil their own artistic aims.

Murdoch, Lessing and Naipaul are all prolific major novelists whose work was first published in the 1950s, and who have continued to write into the 1990s. Because of their prolific output of novels over a period of 50 years, and the ready availability of interviews and essays in which they expound their artistic ideals and practices, they together provide ample material for testing the correlation between stated intentions and artistic success, and the variety of their approaches to ethical problems allows for comparison of the validity of their attempts at solutions, and of their development as writers. Although there is no suggestion that they together represent any specific cultural phase or novelistic tradition, the state of the world in this half-century and its immediate past is for each of them an important influence and forms the context in which their ethical concerns have arisen. They are serious writers who have resisted fashions and made their own decisions about the techniques that best address the problems they have identified, and their prolific output is to some extent a measure of their constant and continuing compulsion to improve on the solutions they have tried: as Iris Murdoch said in 1964, 'Any novelist worth his salt knows very

clearly what is wrong with his work before it is ever published: why else, after all, would he be writing his next novel except to try to correct in it the mistakes of his last?' ('Speaking of Writing').

That said, they are in many ways very different writers with different preoccupations. Iris Murdoch has a background in moral philosophy, and her concerns as a novelist are to a large extent conditioned by that background: they involve the creation of 'free' characters who are not wish-fulfilment fantasies of the author, and who are distinct individuals in their own right rather than merely symbols to be manipulated by the author. For Doris Lessing, the most important issue is somehow to capture the whole truth of experience in a novel without fragmentation, but she also perceives other problems, such as how to go about speaking for the inarticulate, and political scruples, arising from her early socialist beliefs, in writing about one's individual experiences in a world of massive injustices and large-scale disasters. V.S. Naipaul is principally concerned with defining himself in relation to his work, firstly finding his subject, secondly finding the form which best suits it, and thirdly defining his narrative voice and point of view. Even though these seem quite distinct problems, for each author they are connected with being truthful – to themselves and to their subjects: none of them is interested in being entertaining at the expense of a commitment to the truth, although neither do they abjure the importance of pleasing and engaging their readers.

Some of these problems are connected with subject matter, and this is often the aspect emphasised by critics, but decisions about formal and technical matters like plotting, point of view and voice are as intimately connected with solutions to ethical questions as decisions about content. In Chapter One, I look at ethical concerns which have arisen for authors throughout the history of

realist fiction, and theoretical concepts connected with these issues. Chapter Two discusses some of the ethical problems considered by the three authors to be specific to the twentieth century, especially the period following the Second World War.

The remainder of the thesis is divided into three parts, followed by a conclusion and comparison of the achievements of the three authors. For each author, there is an introductory chapter in which I have examined non-fiction sources such as essays and interviews for their views on a series of questions, including their reasons for writing; how conscious they are of the creative process; what they look for in a reader, and what they believe about the status of their intentions; what they think makes a good novel; and their attitudes to a range of issues such as social and political commitment, symbolism, justice, freedom, and the ethical relationship between their activity as authors and the moral world in which their characters operate. Issues raised in these introductory chapters are pursued in more detail for each author in three chapters dealing with various of their fictional works, and in conclusion the achievements of each are examined in the light of their intentions, their beliefs about the nature of fiction and the ways they have tried to solve the problems they have identified.

In the Comparison and Conclusion, the three authors' concerns and ethical strategies for dealing with their concerns are compared. It can be seen that, although for each of them the quest for truth is their highest concern, they have each developed very different ways of dealing with the problems connected with writing truthfully, and in addition, they have defined the particulars of these problems in their own idiosyncratic ways. Iris Murdoch's preoccupation with a rather abstract and general philosophical concept of the

duty of the artist can be seen to have led her to try to achieve a difficult kind of invisibility and openness which conflicted with her natural impulses as a novelist. Doris Lessing, on the other hand, lacks the intellectual rigour and the will to formulate the precise nature of the problems which she senses when she writes, and the contradictions which result from this confusion are sometimes glaring, affecting the internal consistency of her novels. V.S. Naipaul, of the three, has been the most successful in identifying his own admittedly singular place in the tradition of English literature, and in developing throughout his career the peculiar strategies which best suit his needs, with the result that his works of fiction, highly idiosyncratic as they have become, are deeply satisfying and have, at their best, a profound verisimilitude combined with a strong internal consistency.

Establishing the stated intentions of these authors is an important element in this research. However, it is not my aim to use this information to support the interpretation or valuation of their work directly, but to examine their achievements critically in the light of their intentions. I will show in this thesis how the process of self-examination and self-criticism, intelligently and single-mindedly pursued, is a crucial step in the evolution of effective formal approaches to the ethical problems involved in writing fiction.

Chapter One

Ethical Strategies and the Creative Process: Theory and Practice

Throughout the history of the novel, writers have posed ethical questions for themselves, and experimented with their own solutions. That most novelists aim to write truthfully is clear from their discussions of ideas of realism and what it means, and of the formal approaches, such as point of view, narrative voice, and structure, which can be employed to strengthen the illusion of reality in fiction. The existence of a variety of techniques which have been developed and used successfully in realist fiction shows that there is no set of infallible rules, and implies that the methods suitable for one project may not suit another.

Tolstoy believed that 'every great artist necessarily creates his own form … . [In] all that is best in Russian literature … the form was perfectly original' (Allott 265). Nevertheless, his great works still remain well within the conventions of the novel: its boundaries are diffuse enough to accommodate a good deal of adaptation. As to where those boundaries lie, problems have always arisen. E.M. Forster accepted as his definition that of Abel Chevalley: 'a fiction in prose of a certain extent', adding that 'the extent should not be less than 50,000 words' (13). Malcolm Bradbury called it a 'long invented story in prose with a realistic emphasis and very much the original and individual product of one man's experience and imagination' (*What is a Novel?* 7). Margaret Anne Doody, in *The True Story of the Novel*, uses broader criteria, as she is concerned to include classical novels of antiquity in her study:

> I believe that a novel includes the idea of length (preferably forty or more pages), and that, above all, it should be in *prose*. … Yet I do not promise never to mention *Evgeny Onegin* or *The Golden Gate*, and some short fictions, folk tales, or antique and modern novellas … If anybody has called a work a novel at any time, that is sufficient. (10)

This is attractively inclusive, but as all the works considered in detail in this thesis are fictional prose narratives over one hundred pages in length, as far as a

definition is necessary for the purposes of the exercise, Bradbury's formulation will serve (assuming, of course, that the masculine includes the feminine).

Concepts of Realism

In her historical survey of novelists' opinions on the novel, Miriam Allott quotes extracts from letters, diaries and essays from the eighteenth century onwards, and a very common theme is the desire for novels to be truthful. Samuel Richardson wrote in 1752, in a letter to a Miss Mulso, 'What a duce, do you think I am writing a Romance? Don't you see that I am copying Nature …' (41). George Eliot wrote, in an essay on Ruskin, 'the truth of infinite value that he teaches is *realism* – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of a definite, substantial reality' (quoted in Gasiorek 10). The establishment of realistic characters is of great concern: Trollope wrote in his autobiography that the novelist 'desires to make his readers so intimately acquainted with his characters that the creations of his brain should be to them speaking, moving, living, human creatures' (Allott 285). This does not mean they should be drawn from life, however. Henry James, in the Preface to *The Lesson of the Master*, wrote:

> We can surely account for nothing in the novelist's work that hasn't passed through the crucible of his imagination, hasn't, in that perpetually simmering cauldron, his intellectual *pot-au-feu*, been reduced to savoury fusion. … Thus it becomes different, and, thanks to a rare alchemy, a better thing. Therefore let us have as little as possible about its 'being' Mr. This or Mrs. That. If it adjusts itself with the least truth to its new life it can't possibly be either. … If it persists as the impression not artistically dealt with, it shames the honour offered it and can only be spoken of as having ceased to be a thing of fact, and yet not become a thing of truth. (Allott 283-4)

The concept of realism developed over 150 years from Richardson's 'copying nature' to James' 'crucible of the imagination', mirroring a refinement of techniques for its achievement, but naturally many disagreements occurred in

this process: for example, Thackeray believed that Dickens' art did not 'represent Nature duly … the Art of Novels *is* to represent Nature' (Allott 67); and Georges Sand took Flaubert to task for saying, 'when I find that my sentences contain ugly assonance or repetition then I'm sure I am floundering in falsities', replying, 'you seek for nothing more than the well-made sentence … it isn't the whole of art' (Allott 314). Henry James was 'struck, in reading over the pages of Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion' in his 'habit of giving [himself] away which must often bring tears to the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously' (Allott 272), while Trollope believed 'that the author and the reader should move along together in full confidence with each other' (*Barchester Towers* 130).

All these authors identified a set of problems which they approached in their own ways, and their attempts to generalise a set of rules which other novelists should, or should have, followed, are generally misguided. In some cases they may have unhappy consequences, such as those related by Cynthia Ozick in her essay 'The Lesson of the Master', who learned the hard way that she had to reject 'Henry James, in his scepter and his authority' (14), and that 'rapture and homage are not the way. Influence is perdition' (15). New authors must learn the craft for themselves, adapting the rules they find useful to their own situations, and rejecting those which do not work for them, although this is not always a clear and conscious process. In the chapter of Allott's book concerning 'Germination', a procession of authors from Samuel Richardson to Ivy Compton-Burnett describes the beginnings of various of their novels, and the common impression is that the imagination is not entirely under the conscious control of the author: Richardson says, 'the above story recurred to

my thought; and hence sprung Pamela' (134); Dickens 'thought of Mr Pickwick' (134); George Eliot's 'thoughts merged themselves into a dreamy doze, and I imagined myself writing a story' (135) – even in their rational recollections, there is a mystery as to whence the story springs. Ivy Compton-Burnett is asked by an interviewer how she works – 'I like to know how people work', and her reply is, 'I daresay you do, but the people themselves are not always quite sure' (143).

There is commonly a sense of a split personality in the author: Scott describes 'a demon who seats himself on the feather of my pen when I begin to write, and leads it astray from the purpose' (145); and Tolstoy says, 'In a writer there must always be two people – the writer and the critic. And, if one works at night, with a cigarette in one's mouth, although the work of creation goes on briskly, the critic is for the most part in abeyance, and this is very dangerous' (150). The writer, in Tolstoy's scheme, is the creative artist, but the critic must control and discipline what the writer produces, to create 'a true work of art' (235).

Ideas about truthfulness, verisimilitude, and realism have become more sophisticated, but there is still little agreement either on principles or practice. Philip Thody in his book *Twentieth Century Literature* writes, 'all literary judgements are based on personal attitudes, and views as to what does and does not constitute realism are even more subjective than most' (89). Gasiorek traces the history of the concept of realism, showing how post-structuralist critics, in order to attack it, caricatured it and attributed 'a simple-mindedness to realist novelists that it is impossible to justify': for George Eliot, for example, 'realism directs attention to a mind-independent world through empirical observation; its

task is to produce knowledge of that world through empirical observation, and thus to guard against the subjectivism that breeds solipsism'; but this does not 'commit her to the naïve representationalism associated with classic realism' (10): she also emphasised 'the synthetic role of the imagination in processing experience' (11). David Lodge suggests, too, that 'she was well aware of the indeterminacy that lurks in all efforts at human communication' ('*Middlemarch*' 56). Gasiorek argues that realism 'is best seen as an open-ended concept; it gives rise to different narrative modes, which derive from authors' particular projects, aesthetic and political convictions, and changing socio-historical contexts' (17). That it is seen in this way by Doris Lessing, for example, is clear from her claim in 1991 that she had 'only written two unrealistic stories' [*Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*] (Tan Gim Ean et al. 201). A definition of realism that can encompass *Shikasta* and *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* is broad indeed.

One particularly narrow definition of realism involves assumptions like that Iris Murdoch complained of in an interview, that one has 'to write about the working class to write about reality' (Glover 59). Subject matter for most realist novelists is grounded in some way – however obliquely – on the world they know, and authors usually know their limitations. It seems logical that before starting to write, an author must make a choice as to what to write about; but it could almost be said to be a pre-decision. Few writers seem to make their choice coolly and consciously. Naipaul, describing the genesis of *The Enigma of Arrival*, describes a process which took many years, his story becoming that of 'the writer's journey … my theme, the narrative to carry it, my characters – for some years I felt they were sitting on my shoulder, waiting to declare

themselves and to possess me' (*Enigma* 309). When the time finally came to write, 'I let my hand move. I wrote the first pages of many different books; stopped, started again' (310). Even Iris Murdoch, who plans in detail before she starts writing, lets the unconscious do its work early in the process, with 'deep free reflection' (Heusel 4). However, despite the frequent insistence by authors, like Murdoch, that 'it is very difficult to write a novel except about what you deeply understand' (Glover 58), subject matter is frequently the basis of critical attacks on novelists, as the following chapters will show: Murdoch's *The Sandcastle*, Lessing's 'Hunger', and Naipaul's *In a Free State* have all been subjected to such criticism.

Narrative Techniques

Flaubert wrote that 'it isn't enough merely to observe; we must order and shape what we have seen' (Allott 69). Wayne Booth, in his Afterword to the 2nd edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, emphasises that 'the author's single most important creative act is to invent what Aristotle calls the "synthesis of incidents", the "plot" in the sense of the plotted narrative line' (436). The importance of this decision to an author's design can be clearly seen in Richardson's defence of the epistolary method in his Preface to *Clarissa*:

> *Much more* lively and affecting … must be the style of those who write in the height of a *present* distress, the mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty (the events then hidden in the womb of fate); than the dry, narrative unanimated style of a person relating difficulties and danger surmounted, can be … the relater perfectly at ease. (Allott 256)

He admits, however, in the Post-script, that his reason for writing in this way is that 'he perhaps mistrusted his talents for the narrative kind of writing', and further, 'the author thinks he ought not to prescribe the taste of others; but imagined himself at liberty to follow his own' (Allott 256). George Eliot

believed that 'there must be several or many good ways [of telling a story] rather than one best. For we get interested in the stories life presents to us through divers orders and modes of presentation' (Allott 263). Although the narrative in *Middlemarch*, a novel regarded as a classic of realism, seems superficially to follow a straightforward chronological order, some events, such as Bulstrode's history, are related late in the novel, long after they occurred, when they became known to his neighbours in the town. The reader, however, is conscious of no dislocation: the order is dictated by the effect the author wishes to produce. The reader is presented with what Martin calls the 'raw materials of the story (the *fabula*)' by means of the *syuzhet* ('the procedures used to convey them') (107). The distinction between the two concepts may sometimes be blurred or even misleading in practice, but the theory helps because 'we can't discuss the "how" of storytelling without assuming a stable "what" that can be presented in various ways' (107-8).

The aspects which, to the general reader, most plainly reveal a writer's ethics in a novel are the point of view which is chosen, and voice. They are intimately connected with *syuzhet*, and for many authors it would be difficult to differentiate between the various technical decisions involved in a particular novel. Richardson's choice to write in the epistolary mode, for example, is intimately bound up with the immediacy of point of view this technique offers, and what he sees as the 'lively and affecting' impression this will make on his readers, the purpose of which, of course, is to encourage them to continue to read. In general, a first person narrator is more likely to be unreliable, in Booth's terms, that is, one 'whose values, on one or more axes, or whose pictures of the facts of the narrative explicitly depart from those of the implied

author' (*Rhetoric* 431). In more recent novels, this has almost become a convention. Even a first person narrator who is not unreliable has a built-in restriction of his point of view, and must not, if verisimilitude is to be respected, appear to know more than he reasonably can. In practice, this restriction is often stretched well beyond plausibility, as in Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, without most readers noticing; but in any event the first person narrative provides ample opportunity for the author to leave gaps of fact and interpretation to be filled by the reader's imagination. However, if the first person narrator is 'reliable' and not a major character, the difference between the first person and third person narratives may be, effectively, slight. When a third person narrative with multiple points of view is offered, the reader may identify strongly with one, but is more likely to oscillate between them, allowing one to modify another as it is presented. As Wolfgang Iser says,

> the activity of reading can be characterized as a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections. Every sentence contains a preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come; and this in turn changes the 'preview' and so becomes a 'viewfinder' for what has been read. ('Reading Process' 54)

This is true, according to Iser, in all literary texts, but it is more obvious in texts with multiple points of view. An additional effect of the narrative with multiple points of view is that the compulsion the reader feels to continue reading may be intensified by the changes of scene and situation, and the resulting impatience to reach the continuation of the broken sequences. Thus the choice of whether to write in the first or third person is not a simple one, and its effects depend upon many other factors.

Point of view encompasses not merely the distinction between first and third person narrators, but how the author chooses to focalise his narrative. Henry James, in his Preface to *The Golden Bowl*, discussed his

> preference for dealing with my subject-matter, for 'seeing my story', through the opportunity and the sensibility for some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent witness or reporter, some person who contributes to the case mainly a certain amount of criticism and interpretation of it. … the terms of this person's access to [the affair in hand] and estimate of it contributing … by some fine little law to the intensification of interest. (Allott 265)

In this way, James is able to displace his own ethical views onto this character, and avoids what he sees as Trollope's embarrassing presence in his own novels. (Miller points out in 'Narrative and History' that 'it seems as if the fictional imagination, for James at least, can be liberated as long as it hides from itself what it actually is') (457). Martin discusses the development of the idea of focus in critical theory:

> the two basic concepts involved in the study of focalization are those of a focalizer (a perceiver) and that which is focalized (the perceived). If a story contains more than one focalizer, the shifts from one to another become an aspect of narrative structure. (145)

Focalisation is thus a major influence on the implicit morality of a novel. An intimate knowledge of a character's thoughts can, at the same time as it explains and excuses, provide insight into a character's faults, so that although we may sympathise, we may also tend to judge. Booth points out that 'inside views are … one extremely effective way of revealing a moral character hidden to all but the intimate reader', but 'to gain moral sympathy, in addition to the generalized sympathy or warmth that inside views can provide, an author must in some way give us evidence of a character's capacity for admirable choice' (*Rhetoric* 418). The classic example of the successful use of point of view is Austen's *Emma*,

where the focus is carefully controlled to provide exactly the distance needed to allow the reader to see the heroine's faults while retaining sympathy for her. An example of how this inside view can work against a character is Morgan in Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, who has the largest share of the narrative focalization, but who is nevertheless an unlikable and unsympathetic character – it is clear that she has a limited 'capacity for admirable choice'. On the other hand, too great a distance runs the risk of alienating readers by implying that authors despise their characters. Satirists, for example, need the utmost skill to strike exactly the right note.

The voice, or tone, of the narrative is the constant companion, as it were, of the reader, and, whether it is close and sympathetic to the characters, or distant and satirical, has to present the narrative in a way which is somehow rendered congenial to the reader in order to enlist the interest which is usually the only motivation for continuing to read: as Booth would say, 'to win [the reader's] friendship' (*Company* 216). Naturally style is important here. In the case of first-person narrative, the style of the narrator is logically part of the fiction, and the reader should be aware that impersonation is taking place and be able to look past the narrator to the implied author; but third-person narratives also sometimes use a linguistic style which helps authenticate the fiction. An example of this is Lessing's 'Hunger', a story about an African village boy, written in simple, concrete English by an omniscient narrator.

Authors and Readers

Booth's charting of the different types of authors and readers, actual, implied and narratorial, in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* is a useful outline of 'ways of talking about who meets whom in our various reading encounters' (431), but it is often

difficult for the novel-reader to assess exactly the degree of the narrator's identification with the author, and where the implied author stands, and without knowing this, the actual reader can draw quite the wrong conclusion about the beliefs of the actual author. Irony is potentially a particularly slippery tool in this respect. Malcolm Bradbury, in his novel *Stepping Westward*, makes the point vividly if crudely, in a scene where a British academic attempts to teach Swift's *Modest Proposal* to his American students (323-4). Iser says that the 'possibility of verification that all expository texts offer is, precisely, denied by the literary text. At this point there arises a certain amount of indeterminacy which is peculiar to all literary texts, for they permit no referral to any identical real-life situation' ('Indeterminacy' 8). Indeterminacy comes in two kinds, although they are not mutually exclusive: one feeds into the other. The basic indeterminacy is factual, and is, in the conventional novel, usually temporary. The secondary type, which is of interest to Iser, is that of the significance of the facts, the interpretation or moral implication of the narrative. He shows how Dickens uses irony in *Oliver Twist*:

> The hungry child is in the workhouse and with the courage of despair dares ask for more gruel. The supervisors of the workhouse are appalled by this monstrous insolence. What does the commentator have to say? Not only does he support them but he even gives his reasons for doing so. The reaction of the reader is unequivocal, for the author has formulated his commentary in such a way that the reader simply has to reject it. In this manner, the reader's participation in the fate of the child can be brought to the level of actual engagement. ('Indeterminacy' 20-1)

Irony, it can be seen, is not always a means of increasing indeterminacy. Sometimes it is used as a strong moral weapon, leaving no doubt as to the writer's meaning. Irony is always an appeal to the interpretive intelligence of

the implied reader, but it has many levels of complexity, and at its most simple it is taken in the stride of most readers. Wayne Booth says,

> irony is always … in part a device for excluding as well as for including, and those who are included, those who happen to have the necessary information to grasp the irony, cannot but derive at least part of their pleasure from a sense that others are excluded. (*Rhetoric* 304)

It can add to the pleasure of reading, but it also tells readers something about the attitude of the author – it expresses their beliefs, and implies their superiority.

This implication of superiority is at its strongest in satirical writing. It can be argued that the form and dynamics of the novel itself undermine the single moral viewpoint implicit in satire. The nature of the traditional novel, with its complex plot and large cast of characters, both requires and allows a much broader interpretation of life than that of a satirist, although irony, satire and the satiric persona may still remain elements of the novelist's style. The Bakhtinian view is that, in addition, 'the variety of discourses in the novel prevents the novelist from imposing a single world-view on his readers even if he wanted to' (Lodge, 'Novel' 22). Lodge points out how closely Bakhtin's theory, presumably unknowingly, echoes D.H. Lawrence's famous claims for the novel:

> Philosophy, religion, science, they are all of them busy nailing things down, to get a stable equilibrium. ...
>
> But the novel, no. The novel is the highest example of subtle inter-relatedness that man has discovered. Everything is true in its own place, time, circumstance, and untrue outside of its own place, time, circumstance. If you try to nail anything down, in the novel, either it kills the novel, or the novel gets up and walks away with the nail. … Morality in the novel is the trembling instability of the balance. When the novelist puts his thumb in the scale, to pull down the balance to his own predilection, that is immorality. ('Morality' 528)

This process is not necessarily intentional; it does not always arise from a purpose. It can arise, he claims, out of 'the novelist's helpless, unconscious

predilection' (529). Novelists who have a strong belief in a moral, religious, or, more often in the twentieth century, a political point of view, according to these theories, will have trouble expressing their point of view unambiguously through their fiction, without its being undermined by the dynamics of the form. Hayden White argues, 'where, in any account of reality, narrativity is present, we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present too' (22). This activity is based on the ethical decisions made by the writer. However, the kind of 'polyphonic' narrative Bakhtin saw as inevitably characteristic of the novel will include explanations, other points of view (sometimes only implicitly) and more information than can be accommodated into a single moral code: 'the possibility of employing on the plane of a single work discourses of various types, with all their expressive capacities intact, without reducing them to a common denominator – this is one of the most characteristic features of prose' (200).

In this way, a conscious wish to endorse a particular system of morality can be undermined by the way a narrative affects its readers. One novel which suffers markedly from the clash of ideologies is Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited.* The Catholic ideology which Waugh is trying to promote in this work merely causes frustration for a reader who does not share his beliefs: Julia's sacrifice of happiness to the church's inflexible rules seems misplaced and unnecessary, and Charles' conversion to Catholicism seems perverse, in spite of Waugh's obvious approval. As Sean O'Faolain remarks,

> being a man of genius, he should never, under any circumstances, have opinions, for wherever he has written out of his opinions it becomes all too plain ... that imagination is a soaring gull and opinions no more than a gaggle of ungainly starlings, chattering angrily on a cornfield. (68)

On the other hand, Booth in *The Company We Keep* analyses *Emma* to show how Jane Austen was bound by the form of the novel to seem (to many readers) to endorse a fairy-tale ending. He goes on:

> The saving truth is that *Emma* contains within itself the antidotes to its own potential poisons. While it does not in any sense repudiate the fun of pursuing the conventional form, it works hard to alert the careful reader to the need for a double vision – a combination of joyful credulity about the love plot and shrewd sophistication about the characters of men and women. (432)

Booth thus sees the tension between the ethics and the form as firmly under the control of the author in this case. Part of the difference here, of course, is that *Emma* does not seem to have been written to endorse a particular belief system; rather, it shows the value of certain attitudes and behaviour in certain specific circumstances. Louis Menand writes of Jane Austen,

> what makes books last is not that the moral truths they contain outlive their time, and are as applicable today as they were in a society radically different from ours hundreds of years ago. It's that the writer has revealed the endless malleability of moral truths in her own time, and the example is always entirely apt in ours, since the principles and conventions of any age can always be shown to be two-sided – or three-sided, or six sided – affairs. (15)

Whether Austen intended this effect, of course, cannot be known. David Lodge points out, in a discussion of the intentional fallacy,

> If you ask a real author what he intended by a particular scene or episode or sentence and he says, 'I intended to produce an effect *x*', his stated intention is of no consequence to criticism if the episode does not in fact produce that effect; and if it does, there is no point in asking him – unless it happens that you failed to observe this effect by independent reading. The point is not that the real author's comments are without interest but that they do not have absolute authority. ('Indeterminacy' 145)

However, as contemporary authors often discuss their intentions publicly in interviews and other forums outside their fiction, it is interesting to measure their success at 'producing effect *x*' against their own standards.

Wolfgang Iser sees the literary text as a framework within which the reader's imagination will fill in the gaps, and because there are differences in the way the gaps can be filled,

> one text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled. ('Reading Process' 55)

Kermode, in the same vein, talks of the 'radiant obscurity of narratives' (*Genesis* 47): in his view, the text is a kind of screen through which readers glimpse its secrets, the secrets seen by each individual reader being dependent on the angle from which they are observed. And J. Hillis Miller says that 'poets, novelists and playwrights say things which are exceedingly odd by most everyday standards of normality. Any way of interpreting literature would need to account for that oddness' (*Fiction* 18). But one needs to be wary of noticing more than the text allows. As Kermode says, 'we shall have to agree that the signals are there before we can use them to speak of the work's larger existence': the indirect meanings are not 'fixed and constant, [but] they can be apprehended only through the literal sense' (*Essays* 30). Miller's oddness is linguistic and rhetorical, closer to the surface than Kermode's secrets. When he claims that authors 'say things which are exceedingly odd', he is discussing the way they use language, what they 'say', rather than what they imply. Kermode points out that

> in the ordinary business of life we give great emphasis to the pragmatic aspect of language, screening out hesitations, parapraxes, fumbled performances. … But in the 'depragmatised' language of a novel such a mistake (whether in accordance with the author's intention or not) might be of great importance, as a sign of that larger existence beyond the confines of the text. (*Essays* 31)

So when Miller notices oddness in literature, it may be that it is not outside the normal range of odd occurrences, but only that it is more noticeable, and therefore seems more significant, because it is not edited out or glossed over by the hearer in the way that day-to-day oddness is. In any event, none of these critics believes in the existence of a single correct interpretation of a literary work. Indeterminacy is, to some extent, a quality all fiction shares.

That fact that novels are not suitable vehicles for espousing causes is of more concern to some writers than others. Neither Murdoch or Naipaul wish to use their fictional writing in this way, but even though she denies the novel should be a 'blueprint for a better way of correct thinking' (Ingersoll 232), Doris Lessing complains in her Preface to the 1972 edition of *The Golden Notebook* that 'there is no doubt that to attempt a novel of ideas is to give oneself a handicap', and blames 'the parochialism of our culture' (13) – she believes that the European tradition is more open to these types of novels. Nevertheless, she ends the Preface thus:

> it is not only childish of a writer to want readers to see what he sees, to understand the shape and aim of a novel as he sees it – his wanting this means that he has not understood a most fundamental point. Which is that the book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion *only* when its plan and shape and intention are not understood. (20-21)

(As I will discuss later, this has not prevented her wanting readers to understand her intentions.) Israeli author Amos Oz is particularly wary of claiming the moral high ground: 'I doubt if writers and poets have integrity or even should have. I think though that some of us are capable of defusing the deadly integrity of the fanatic, the monomaniac, the raging ideologist, the murderous crusader' (235). The common thread here is the necessity of avoiding narrowness and the danger, or impossibility, of trying to shut out ambiguities in literature in the service of particular moral (including political) messages. David Parker, in

Ethics, Theory and the Novel, sees the modern identity as made up of two conflicting strands of morality, the Judaeo-Christian-Kantian and the Romantic-Enlightenment-Nietzschean, and 'we cannot deny either without narrowing our understanding of the full range of goods we actually live by' (37). Reading and writing fiction is still an ethical exercise, however: Robertson Davies writes:

> every writer is, in one way or another, a moralist. Not, let me hasten to say, that he seeks to impose ideas of truth and conduct on his readers ... but because he observes life from the standpoint of his own spirit and personality, and he records what he sees: certain courses of action bring, inevitably, certain consequences. (220)

Narratives have many ways of implying their morality, and this tends to become more complicated as the narrative lengthens into novel form. The '"moralizing" ending' which Hayden White sees as an inevitable feature of historical narration (22) is too simple a concept to carry the whole weight of the ethics implicit in even a short novel. Frank Kermode writes, in *The Sense of an Ending*, 'the story that proceeded very simply to its obviously pre-ordained end would be nearer myth than novel or drama' (18), and

> we have to distinguish between myths and fictions. Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fictive. ... Fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. (39)

Kermode's explanation of the dynamics of the delayed ending, the 'disconfirmation followed by a consonance' (18) adds the requisite complexity to White's model:

> The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naive expectations, is finding something out for us, something *real.* (18)

Iser believes the upsetting of expectations in fiction is crucial. In literary texts, he claims,

> we feel that any confirmative effect – such as we implicitly demand of expository texts – is a defect … For the more a text individualizes or confirms an expectation it has initially aroused, the more aware we become of the didactic purpose, so that at best we can only accept or reject the thesis forced upon us. More often than not, the very clarity of such texts will make us want to free ourselves from their clutches. (‘Reading Process’ 53)

But novels are full of ‘confirmative effects’, and would make little sense without them. Martin remarks, ‘conventions are not a constraint on genuine communication; they make it possible’ (159). Kermode’s ‘daring peripeteia’ may impress readers and upset their expectations, but must be used sparingly, since the basis of communication is a shared language, a shared feeling of how narratives are usually structured; and to subvert these shared values too often will, after a while, cease to be shocking or surprising, and become just another conventional narrative device.

Booth claims that we can always find ‘writers’ religious, political and cultural programs ... embodied in their metaphoric structures’ (*Company* 341), and that as long as we remember that narratives are metaphoric constructions, we can ‘embrace vigorously’ what they add to our picture of reality (345). If all fiction is characterised by indeterminacy, however, the interpretation of the supposed metaphor must be inferred by the reader, whether intentionally implied by the author or not, and we cannot rely on metaphorical structures to convey the author’s moral framework, as Booth claims.

According to Iser, ‘the literary text is characterized by the fact that it does not state its intentions’ (‘Indeterminacy’ 43), and this is true of most conventional fiction (although this convention is calmly flouted by Naipaul later

in his career). Authors may try to overcome this by over-using symbols in an attempt to imply their meaning less ambiguously. Eudora Welty believes that symbols

> are a legitimate part of fiction … desirable as any device is, so long as it serves art. Symbols have to spring from the work direct, and stay alive. Symbols for the sake of symbols are counterfeit … However alive they are, they should never call for an emphasis greater than the emotional reality they serve, in their moment, to illuminate. (60)

Even more dangerously, authors may try to signal their intentions by making overt moral statements. Most readers will resist the crudeness of this approach, and dismiss the message the author is at pains to convey. John Updike writes, 'the novel, whatever it is or was, must be more than an illustrated lecture; it must make us think without knowing we are thinking' ('Novel Thoughts' 114). Kermode likens readers to children – even autistic children – in our 'abnormally acute appetites' (*Sense* 56) for ends and crises, and perhaps the demand for the sugaring of the ethical pill is another aspect of the reader's 'childishness'. Lawrence claimed that 'art must contain the essential criticism on the morality to which it adheres' ('Study of Thomas Hardy' 476). D.J. Taylor gives Fay Weldon as an example of 'the most cursory fragment of scene-setting providing an excuse for another salvo in the sex war' (259): and complains that the conclusions of 'many a contemporary women's novel … are pre-ordained, the vigour of its characters reduced by their thraldom to destiny, its claims to plausibility eventually anaesthetised by sheer good intentions' (264).

The main problem with the overtly moralistic or over-symbolic approach is, as this implies, that it interferes with the freedom of the characters in the narrative. The precise meaning of freedom in this context is however difficult to establish. Kermode points out that characters cannot be absolutely free, 'for

if the man were entirely free he might simply walk out of the story' (*Sense* 138).

Forster writes, in *Aspects of the Novel*,

> The characters arrive when evoked, but full of the spirit of mutiny. For they have these numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book. They 'run away', they 'get out of hand': they are creations inside a creation, and often inharmonious towards it; if they are given complete freedom they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying, and destroy it by intestinal decay. (74)

The quest to create 'free' characters is nevertheless a preoccupation with many serious novelists. Virginia Woolf believed

> that all novels ... deal with character, and that it is to express character – not to preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire, that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic and alive, has been evolved. (Allott 290)

Critical Approaches

In summary, then, ethical problems faced by all authors include their choice of subject matter; their arrangement of the events of their *fabula* into their *syuzhet*; their point of view – or choice of focalisers; their narrative voice – whether to write humorously, satirically, or earnestly, and the distance to maintain from their characters; whether to attempt to promote a specific set of beliefs, in view of the novel's inherent unsuitability as a vehicle for propaganda; whether and how to use symbolism; and how best to create realistic characters. And the most basic question for the critic, in the end, is how to assess a writer's success. Murdoch has commented that 'no novel can be as clarified and as non-accidental and complete as it seems, and as it aims at seeming, to us when we are absorbed in it' ('Salvation' 239): the problem is to judge the extent of the illusion of completeness, and to make objective such subjective judgments as a novel's credibility, internal consistency, and even perhaps the pleasure it affords. L.R. Leavis, who, in his 1989 article 'Creative Values and the Contemporary Novel', states that 'literary tradition exhibiting the highest achievements in the novel … is waiting for a major successor in our age' (347),

criticises Murdoch for lacking 'artistic inevitability' ('Anti-Artist' 142) in her novels; but such a quality is difficult to pin down. Eudora Welty tries to define the way communication occurs in fiction:

> … communication is going on … when you believe the writer. … Belief doesn't depend on plausibility, but it seems to be a fact that validity of a kind, and this is of course a subjective kind, gained in whatever way that had to be, is the quality that makes a work reliable as art. This reliability comes straight out of the writer himself. … It is that by which each writer *lets us believe* – doesn't ask us to, can't make us, simply lets us. (61-2)

The question of belief relates directly to our sense of the truthfulness of art. One explanation for a sense of falsity is offered by Parker:

> the novelist only apparently resolves the tension by attempting to suppress one sort of moral claim in the interests of the other. The drive to resolve all conflicts in this way is nothing else but a will-to-master-narrative, and where this arises ... the art becomes schematic, shallow, sentimental, evasive, insistent, or non-explanatory. (57)

These qualities can only be discovered in the analysis of actual works of art in their specificity, as he shows in his chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Anna Karenina*, among others. Booth's *The Company We Keep* is an extended examination of literary value and how it is established; that is, how we judge fiction. He concludes that

> we must avoid at all costs the effort to reduce literary 'goods' to one kind; instead, we should seek to clarify and embrace a *plurality* of goods, exhibited in particular coductions, while vigorously expressing our reasons for mistrusting those narrative experiences that would, if taken alone, undermine *all* the defensible projects. (115)

'Coduction' is his own neologism for the communal enterprise of criticism – 'performed with a genuine respect both for one's own intuitions and for what other people have to say' rather than 'any deduction of quality from general ethical principles' (76). Booth's attractive metaphorical use of the concept of friendship for the type of experience literature offers has the advantage of

including the concept of pleasure: often, in literary criticism or theory, as Roland Barthes notes,

> No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion. (57)

Tolstoy seems to deny the usefulness or possibility of criticism when he says that ‘one of the significant facts about a true work of art [is] that its content in its entirety can be expressed only by itself’ (Allott 235). Nevertheless, by close reading, a critic may hope to establish, for particular novels, the features whereby it succeeds or fails (or both) to convince or please, using, as Booth implies, criteria which arise from the individual work of art itself, in its context; and when we have external evidence as to intentions we are, further, able to assess their success on their own terms. The long careers of Murdoch, Lessing and Naipaul provide a wealth of material for a study of this nature.

Chapter Two

The Twentieth Century: A New Age for the Novel?

> The most obvious difference between nineteenth-century novels and twentieth-century novels is that the nineteenth-century ones are better.
>
> Iris Murdoch, 'Existentialists and Mystics', 1970 (221)

> … the warmth, the compassion, the humanity, the love of people which illuminates the literature of the nineteenth century and which makes all these old novels a statement of faith in man himself … are qualities which I believe are lacking from literature now.
>
> Doris Lessing, 'The Small Personal Voice', 1957 (15)

> The great societies that produced the great novels of the past have cracked. Writing has become more private and more privately glamorous. The novel as a form no longer carries conviction.
>
> V.S. Naipaul, 'Conrad's Darkness', 1974 (244)

What are the changes that have caused this perception of crisis in the modern novel? What causes a literary journalist like D.J. Taylor to declare that 'we read Dickens and George Eliot at school and we know, we just *know*, that no modern writer – certainly no modern English writer – can hold a candle to them' (xiv)? Murdoch, Lessing and Naipaul, throughout their careers, have all pondered these questions, as have many other authors and critics. Each of them has suggested remedies, to which they have aspired, with varying degrees of success. And each of them offers, implicitly or explicitly, different reasons for the change.

Of the three, Murdoch has examined the question most systematically. It is one she often addressed in philosophical essays and interviews. In her 1960 essay 'The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited' she discussed Romanticism in relation to the history of the novel. '[I]t is remarkable,' she wrote,

> and in ways entirely relevant to its characteristic and pre-eminent merits, how very un-Romantic the great nineteenth-century novel is. … There is in these novels a plurality of real persons more or less naturalistically presented in a large social scene, and representing mutually independent centres of significance which are those of real individuals. … Here one may see the Liberal spirit at its best and

> richest, disporting itself in literature, and not yet menaced by those elements of Romanticism which later proved, if I am right, so dangerous. (271)

For romanticism, in the modern novel, has developed into neurosis and produces ‘tightly conceived thing-like books’ (279). At the other extreme, there is ‘a loose journalistic epic, documentary or possibly even didactic in inspiration, offering a commentary on current institutions or on some matter out of history’ (278). Versions of this polarity were also offered at about the same time by Lessing, and by Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution*. While what Murdoch missed in the modern novel was the individual character who is distinct from the author, Williams saw the twentieth century problem as a matter of imbalance. In the great realist novels, he says, ‘we attend with our whole senses to every aspect of the general life, yet the centre of value is always in the individual human person – not any one isolated person, but the many persons who are the reality of the general life’ (279). Since 1900, realist fiction styles, he believed, had divided into the social novel and the personal novel, a distinction closely matching Murdoch’s ‘things’ (personal novels) or truths (social novels). Lessing’s view added another dimension: obviously her reading habits were different:

> If the typical product of communist literature during the last two decades is the cheerful little tract about economic advance, then the type of Western literature is the novel or play which one sees or reads with a shudder of horrified pity for all of humanity. If writers like Camus, Sartre, Genet, Beckett, feel anything but a tired pity for human beings, then it is not evident from their work.
>
> I believe that the pleasurable luxury of despair, the acceptance of disgust, is as much a betrayal of what a writer should be as the acceptance of the simple economic view of man; both are aspects of cowardice. (‘small Personal Voice’ 15)

It is notable that these views all share an ethical dimension: the view of life which authors imply is more important than an aesthetic standard.

Richard Clark Sterne believes that 'the idea of ethical natural law has faded in the modern mind' (xxi), the result being 'the depiction of existence, in much of the best imaginative writing of our age, as absurd' (xx). D.J. Taylor claims that

> we live in a highly sophisticated, technological world governed by huge, distantly glimpsed and apparently impersonal forces, in which communications as much as morals have tended to invalidate the traditional novel of character. The whole plot of a novel like Trollope's *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, which hinges on the absence overseas of a crucial witness, could not take place in a world without telephones. (173)

But plots can still hinge on communication failures even in a world supplied with telephones, as Murdoch's *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* shows. Major technological innovations which significantly affected everyday life, like the railways and the telegraph, were, in any event, a common feature of the nineteenth century, and did not prevent the 'traditional novel of character' from flourishing. The same impulse to write truthfully but enjoyably about the world still animates novelists. Jane Gardham, echoing many of her nineteenth-century predecessors, believes 'that the most important thing about [fiction] is to entertain, but … "entertaining" [is] a much more fluid, healthier and wiser than the novel with a purpose, the novel that sets out to instruct' (16): compare this with Hardy: 'novels which most conduce to moral profit are likely to be among those written without a moral purpose' (Allott 98), or Hawthorne: 'when romances do really teach anything, … it is usually through a far more subtile process than the ostensible one' (Allott 93). That fiction is still believed to contain moral values is clear from the publication of such books as Colin McGinn's *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (1997). McGinn observes that 'our moral understanding and the story form seem fitted for one another' (174). He claims

that it is 'so obvious that I am almost embarrassed to state' that 'reading novels (or watching plays and films, or reading poetry and short stories) … is … for most people … the primary way in which they acquire ethical attitudes, especially in contemporary culture' (174-5). D.J. Taylor, in spite of his belief that morality has been eroded in the post-war world, in a discussion of novels which criticise imperialism (in itself a moral activity) says that 'it is easy … to talk of the subversion of agreeable but unsustainable myths, but equally easy to argue that the truly agreeable myth of the post-war era is that of the wicked colonial oppressor' (56); a myth which has become widely adopted in the morality of the post-colonial world. Moral values have not disappeared: they have merely shifted their emphasis.

Twentieth-century novelists' nostalgia for an earlier age of greatness is described by Salman Rushdie as 'culturally endemic golden-ageism; that recurring, bilious nostalgia for a literary past that at the time didn't seem much better than the present does now' ('In Defense' 49). David Lodge points out that 'the English Victorian novel … is represented by the work of perhaps a dozen novelists, out of the thousand or more who actually wrote novels in this period' ('The Novel Now' 11). Often the differences in our lives from theirs are emphasised and the homogeneity of experience within their time is assumed: Margaret Anne Doody has noted how 'untidiness on the part of the *zeitgeist* distresses world-pictures involved in some critical claims' (3); we might contemplate an entity we call 'the nineteenth century novel', but find on examining examples that they deviate in important ways from the norm. Taylor admits that 'one talks confidently about "the novelist". In fact there are only novelists' (xxiv), but still makes large claims such as 'the great Victorian

fictional beings seem to bestride their world; its concerns are theirs; they invariably dominate it' (174).

Reasons given for the changes in the novel, by writers and critics, include historical events, such as the world wars and the break-up of the European empires; the erosion of the unquestioned status of organised religions in western societies; psychological sophistication which makes writers (and readers) unprecedentedly self-conscious; the rapid pace of technological change and scientific discovery in this century; political and social changes attributable to these factors, as well as socialism and other movements – feminism, postcolonialism, multiculturalism; and linguistic and aesthetic theories which, along with the development of psychology, have made unself-conscious writing increasingly difficult. These factors, however, have differing effects on the practice of individual writers. As Gasiorek says

> postmodernism is so often invoked as a cultural dominant that a diverse range of literary forms come to be seen in a homogeneous fashion as part of a general 'crisis of representation' … To read authors who engage in quite different ways with the epistemological and aesthetic difficulties entailed by representation as though they are all participating in the same pursuit is to 'flatten out' the post-war period in a way that can only contribute to the very dehistoricization that critics of postmodernism lament. (vi)

The three authors included in my study have certainly 'engaged in quite different ways' with the problems of writing in this period, and they have also defined their difficulties differently.

Doris Lessing regards the two world wars as 'the two influences in my life – these wars. The older I get, the more I realize just what an influence they have been' (Thomson 179). She suspects that they have left a 'pattern of disaster' (Forde 218) in her mind which exerts a powerful but unconscious force on her creative work, citing a story which had occurred to her in which

the simplest task becomes virtually impossible because of obstacles her mind would throw up in the path of her character. Stories of this type, however, are not new. A narrative that does not contain some sort of struggle against unusual odds, some kind of testing of the mettle of its protagonist, would be, indeed, out of the ordinary. Whilst the wars undoubtedly influenced her, the pattern in her mind may have been there without them, as it has occurred in the minds of storytellers from the time of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* onwards.

In her Afterword to *The Story of an African Farm* she describes the novel as 'that hybrid, the mixture of journalism and the *Zeitgeist* and autobiography that comes out of a part of the human consciousness which is always trying to understand itself, to come into the light' (163). But in spite of her opinion, quoted above, that 'all those old novels' were 'a statement of faith in man himself' she does not admire them unreservedly. '*Wuthering Heights* is an appalling novel … but it doesn't really matter' (Thorpe 98); she admires George Eliot enormously, but there is ' a kind of womanly certitude … something too cushioned in her judgments' (Bigsby, 'Need to Tell Stories' 71); and '*Anna Karenina*. What a marvelous book! … is a story about nothing, about a local society, a very local, temporary set of social circumstances'. She goes on,

> in fact, a good deal of Victorian fiction can be classified like that … These tragedies are mini-tragedies because they derive from fairly arbitrary social conditions; they are not rooted in any human nature. … We now live with our heads in the middle of exploding galaxies and thinking about quasars and quarks and black holes and alternative universes and so on, so that you cannot any more get comfort from old moral certainties because something new is happening. All our standards of values have been turned upside down. (Bigsby, 'Need' 72)

To condemn Tolstoy to obsolescence because society has changed, and the problems his characters faced no longer exist, is an extraordinary statement for

a novelist to make. The novel deals in such particularities – as Williams says, ‘a particular apprehension of a relation between individuals and society’ (279). Historiography or journalism can show the big picture, but the novel can show the consequences of wars, laws, social attitudes, moral creeds, at the personal level. As Updike says, ‘a writer’s witness, surely, is of value in its circumstantiality’ (‘Why Write’ 3). If authors believed that individuals no longer mattered – as E.L. Doctorow says he was beginning to feel, ‘that the story of any given individual … may not be able to sustain an implication for the collective fate’ (240) – then the novel would very quickly die. And of course Lessing knows this, at the level at which she actually creates her fiction, rather than that at which she expounds her beliefs in essays and interviews. Another odd aspect of her statement is the notion that nineteenth-century society was not rooted in human nature. All human societies are necessarily expressions of human nature, and the behaviour of individuals is a result of their various human natures reacting to their circumstances. All of Lessing’s characters – Martha Quest, Anna Wulf, Jane Somers, Ambien II, Mara – are individuals struggling in the world as it is, on a personal level, without understanding the causes of their troubles, however much their creator purports to know. And if they matter at all, they matter because they are unique individuals (which is what they have in common with real people), not because they are especially representative and belong to a society more quintessential than that portrayed in nineteenth century fiction. This is an example of the type of illogical thinking that mars Lessing’s novels. She has certainly experimented with new forms to suit the ethical problems she has discovered for herself, but a little more rational analysis of exorbitant claims like these

may have prevented her work from exhibiting determinism, didacticism and what Jeanette King calls ‘a potentially authoritarian dimension’ (92).

Murdoch is more modest than Lessing about the claims of modern novelists to have improved on the nineteenth century tradition. She writes in ‘The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited’,

> Many reasons might be given for the particular qualities of the nineteenth-century novel: reasons which might connect it with particular, now-vanished historical and social conditions… Whereas society in the nineteenth century was either a reassuring place where one lived, or else an exciting, rewarding, interesting place where one struggled, society today tends to appear, by contrast, as menacing, puzzling, uncontrollable, or else confining, and boring. (272, 279)

This is a fair description, perhaps, of the impression given by reading some of the fiction of the respective periods, but for many of the females of the nineteenth century with any kind of material security, society could hardly have seemed more ‘confining and boring’: a recurrent theme in Jane Austen is the infinite patience the female characters need to get through their days, with little scope for action beyond a walk to the drapers, and the Victorian era was hardly an improvement in this respect. And for Dickens’ characters, society is often not reassuring; it can seem very ‘menacing, puzzling and uncontrollable’. They did not have the particular menace of the nuclear holocaust in view, but they might have found the prospect of the workhouse or death in childbirth similarly upsetting. The bizarre juxtaposition, in the developed societies of the twentieth century, of increasing material security and improvements in medical science, especially in the fifties and sixties, with the threat of complete destruction of human society posed by the cold war, may have resulted in the postmodern fragmentation of modern literature, but that may also indicate, paradoxically, a greater feeling of security. Philip Stevick pointed out in 1973

that 'new fiction … elevates play to the very centre of the complex of apparent motives that animate the work' (215). The kind of playfulness of a novel like *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is not a symptom of insecurity, but its opposite, in spite of its serious underlying myth. Murdoch fights against and to some extent sloughs off what Dipple calls entrapment 'by the theories and preoccupation of a milieu which encourages self-concentration from both writer and reader' (4), but she still regrets she cannot write in the same way as the novelists of the past whom she admires so much. She notes that the modern novelist 'would find it difficult to write as they did without an element of pastiche', that the typical writer of the twentieth century 'won't … describe his characters from the outside; he will describe them from consciousness, or if he suddenly describes them from the outside, this will be an obvious literary device' (Magee 535) (which, incidentally, also applies to some of Austen's fiction, especially *Persuasion).* Nevertheless, her preoccupation with aiming for what she suspects is impossible, but believes is a moral imperative for the novelist – the high standards of the novel as it was written in the nineteenth century – has, by turning her attention away from what she might have achieved if she rethought the form on her own terms, restricted her development as an artist. James Wood comments that it is 'frustrating … to see a novelist so well-equipped artistically, skidding about on this hard philosophical ice' ('Iris Murdoch' 184).

Naipaul was brought up on Dickens and other classic English novelists, making what sense he could of an alien society in his Trinidad home. In later life, however, he has claimed to find the novelists of the nineteenth century less interesting than essayists of the period like Hazlitt and Charles Lamb, who

'would have had their gifts diluted or corrupted by the novel form as it existed in their time', and who, 'novelistic as they are in the pleasures they offer, found their own forms'. Of novelists like Trollope and Thackeray, great as they are as observers of society, he feels 'the need for narrative and plot sat on [their] shoulders like a burden'. He insists, echoing Tolstoy, that 'every serious writer has to be original', and 'the other man's forms served the other man's thoughts' ('On Being a Writer'). He may, however, be projecting his own difficulties with what he sees as the conventional novel form onto these writers. Trollope did not regard plot highly, but he was quite happy to use it as 'the vehicle' for 'a picture of common life enlivened by humour and sweetened by pathos' (Allott 247), and in any event, he, as well as his major contemporaries, did adapt the novel to his own devices. The major novelists of the nineteenth century may have much in common, but they are also each unique in the uses they made of the form as it existed at their time. Consider the vast differences between *Wuthering Heights*, *Middlemarch*, *The Way We Live Now,* and *Oliver Twist.* All these novels are of their time, but they describe quite different worlds, and reveal great differences in sensibility, while still falling solidly within the definition of 'the novel'. Naipaul feels the inadequacy of the current form to his content because his experience is further from the mainstream of the tradition than that of someone like Murdoch; and although his deployment of the form, which is of its very nature protean anyway, worked brilliantly with little overt experimentation in *A House for Mr Biswas*, since then his most successful works, like *In a Free State* and *The Enigma of Arrival*, have moved beyond the conventional novel form, if considered as a chronological narrative unified by characters and plot. He says,

> You might go on endlessly writing 'creative' novels, if you believed that the framework of an ordered society exists, so that after a disturbance there is calm, and all crises fall back into that great underlying calm. But that no longer exists for most people. (Rowe-Evans 36)

It is one of Naipaul's strengths as a writer that he does not participate in this illusion of security, and because he has been forced to define his own individual problems with the form, rather than identifying a set of general standards, he has developed a series of ethical strategies uniquely suited to his personal needs.

One reason for the obvious differences in novels written since the second world war is that we know more about the natural world, and about the human mind, and about what human beings are capable of under extreme circumstances: Gasiorek says of the immediate post-war period, 'the horrors of the war seemed to outstrip the literary imagination' (2). There are, also, standards of decorum which have vanished, so that there is now, it seems, nothing that cannot be written about. Miriam Allott claimed in her introduction to *Novelists on the Novel* (1959) that 'nineteenth-century social conventions are partly responsible for hindering the development of the English novelist's understanding of his moral responsibilities as an artist' (33); but Taylor points out that

> the post-Chatterley trial relaxation gave writers a hitherto unthought-of degree of freedom, but it also presented them with an obligation – to find an appropriate language in which descriptions of sexual activity could be conveyed. With very few exceptions this obligation has been ignored, and the freedom to write about sex in whatever way you choose is generally agreed to have been an aesthetic disaster. (233)

On the other hand, in the case of a nineteenth-century character such as Becky Sharp, her charm 'is all done by hints and allusions, a code of occlusion which

demands the reader's participation and has the effect of increasing, rather than diminishing, Becky's appeal' (221). Naipaul has remarked that

> if I were an English person trying to be a writer, I wouldn't know how to start. I don't see how you can write about England without falling into parody, without competing with what you've read, without wishing to show that you know it too – class, sex, and so on. (Hussein 155)

Besides feeling compelled to mention the previously unmentionable, writers are constrained by advances in psychological knowledge. Not only do the popular versions of Freudian theories make it impossible to portray the kind of uncomplicated affection between family members which is common in Austen and Dickens, but new discoveries about the physical nature of the human brain and its role in the perception of reality were becoming widely known in the post-war period. Raymond Williams wrote in 1961,

> the new facts about perception make it impossible for us to assume that there is any reality experienced by man into which man's own observations and interpretations do not enter. Thus the assumptions of naïve realism – seeing things as they really are, quite apart from our reactions to them – become impossible. (20)

Gasiorek finds in his study of post-war British fiction that 'attention to language's constitutive role, the doubleness inherent in fictional representation, and the impossibility of unmediated access to the real, are everywhere apparent' (19). Framed narratives, magical realism and metafiction have become common. These techniques are, of course, not new to the twentieth century. The classic example is *Tristram Shandy*, but there is a great deal of self-consciousness in *Tom Jones*, and English writers in the nineteenth century did not shed this tendency entirely, however much they professed realism as their aim. The narrative framework of many of the great novels is deliberately put on view, and first-person novels, which carry within themselves the seeds of indeterminacy, were common in the nineteenth century. On the whole,

however, as Taylor points out, ‘Victorian displays of self-consciousness were never allowed to penetrate the carapace of personality’ (292).

The stability usually assumed to be characteristic of Victorian England was as much of an illusion, and recognized as such, as it is in any western society today. Peter Keating observes

> That there are relatively few complete or harmonious families to be found in Victorian fiction is not a repudiation of the importance attached to the idea. The broken family units – widows and sons, widowers and daughters, guardians and wards, aunts and nephews, lonely and endangered orphans – all serve to emphasise the precariousness of the social fabric and point forward to the stable unity that only marriage and children can convincingly represent. It often reads like the impossible dream it was. (161)

Happy endings do not obscure what Williams called ‘the intensity of the central experience’ of ‘those lonely exposed figures’ (68): as Peter Brooks says, ‘if at the end of a narrative we can suspend time in a moment when past and present hold together in a metaphor … that moment does not abolish the movement, the slidings, the mistakes, and partial recognitions of the middle’ (92). Keating believes that ‘the omniscience of the novelist, and therefore the characteristically Victorian form of realism, was only possible because the existence was assumed of a higher form of omniscience’ (160). And it may be true that, for many Victorians, their religious belief meant that death held fewer terrors, and a virtuous, long-suffering character in Dickens, like Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*, who goes uncomplaining to his death is confidently assumed by Dickens’ implied reader to be spending eternity among the celestial hosts, while no such fate would be predicted for Jenkin Riderhood in Murdoch’s *The Book and the Brotherhood* when he is killed by a stray bullet in a duel in which he had no part. But even this difference may be over-emphasised. Doody remarks that ‘some twentieth-century novels of repute

have been written – and read – by theists and Scripture readers' (3), and Charles Taylor, in an analysis of Murdoch's moral philosophy, notes that 'even the grossest superstitions survive in advanced societies, and these were on the other hand always condemned by minorities' (25). Furthermore, as D.J. Taylor notes, 'novels about religious doubt were a staple of the Victorian best-seller lists' (169).

John Fowles, in his 'Notes on an Unfinished Novel', refers to Robbe-Grillet's question, '*Why bother to write in a form whose great masters cannot be surpassed?'*

> The fallacy of one of his conclusions – we must discover a new form to write in if the novel is to survive – is obvious. It reduces the purpose of the novel to the discovery of new forms: whereas its other purposes – to entertain, to satirize, to describe new sensibilities, to record life, to improve life, and so on – are clearly just as viable and important. But his obsessive pleading for new form places a kind of stress on every passage one writes today. To what extent am I being a coward by writing inside the old tradition? To what extent am I being panicked into avant-gardism? (139-140)

The novel is a flexible form and for each talented writer it is capacious and adaptable enough to suit a multitude of purposes. Rushdie asserts that 'there is no crisis in the art of the novel', and following an enumeration of some recent innovations in this 'hybrid form', concludes, 'the novel can welcome these developments without feeling threatened. There's room for all of us in here' ('In Defense' 50). It may certainly be said that novels of a particular period share characteristics, but, as Sontag says, 'seen from the outside, that is, historically, stylistic decisions can always be correlated with some historical development.… But this approach, however sound and valuable, of necessity sees matters grossly' (32). Historical context is important, but it is only one of the factors that affect the choices authors need to make about form and content

in their fiction. To ignore it altogether would be foolish, but simply to believe, like Murdoch, that nineteenth century writers are intrinsically greater, or like Lessing that they are intrinsically more trivial, than contemporary writers, can result in the failure of a writer to examine critically the nature of their own personal artistic impulses and circumstances; a process which is crucial to the success of their work in both ethical and aesthetic terms.

Chapter Three

Iris Murdoch: Introduction

Iris Murdoch was a philosopher before she succeeded as a novelist, and continued to teach philosophy at Oxford for several years after her first novel was published. The place of philosophy in her fiction is, however, surrounded with paradoxes. She has said, 'I mention philosophy sometimes in the novels because I happen to know about it, just as another writer might talk about coal mining' (Biles 116); and that in fact 'as a novelist, I would rather know about sailing ships and hospitals than about philosophy' (Magee 535). It is, however, hard to imagine how the practical knowledge of some aspect of technology could replace the pervasive influence of her moral philosophy in her fiction. Apart from playful elements, like the Wittgensteinian jokes in *Under the Net* and *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, her philosophical sophistication and informed attention to moral problems are some of her most distinctive features as a novelist: she refrains from preaching, but often presents moral and philosophical theories only to subject them to the strain which is inevitable in their practical application. She admits to being, 'in a way, a Wittgensteinian; but if I am a Wittgensteinian, I am one in a proper, as it were, negative sense. It isn't that one has got any body of theory, but one has got a style and a way of looking at philosophical problems' (Bellamy 137). Writing fiction is part of her philosophical style, and this may be in the final analysis her greatest problem: James Wood remarks that it is possible to 'read … her novels as hapless enactments of philosophy, as necessary metaphysical failures or lapses' ('Iris Murdoch' 180).

Compared with other novelists, Naipaul for example, she has not said much at all about why she writes. In her 1968 interview with William Rose, she said that the impulse to write was an early one: 'I started writing stories when I was about 9 or 10, and I always knew that this was what I wanted to do' (63). She does not give the impression of anxiety or neurosis about her ambition; she 'always knew that I would do something else as well' (Rose 63). Her reasons for writing novels, insofar as they are defined at all, are implicit in statements like, 'Literature could be said to be a sort of disciplined technique for arousing certain emotions. That is certainly one of the reasons why one enjoys it, and one of the reasons why it is both good for us when it is good and bad for us when it is bad' (Magee 533). She does not, she says, 'wait for inspiration; I just go ahead and work office hours, as it were' (Rose 70). Although she told Rosemary Hartill in 1989, 'I can't imagine not needing to write. I should be very unhappy if I couldn't write' (92), she evinces little curiosity, and few doubts, about her reasons for writing.

She is more concerned with her attempts to create 'free' characters, and the difficulties she finds doing so. The creative process is to some extent beyond the control of her conscious mind. She told Frank Kermode in 1963 that she was always attempting to represent 'character in the old-fashioned sense … but I find it very difficult to do so' ('House' 63); and fifteen years later she is still saying: 'all the time, one is terribly conscious of one's limitations as an artist … one's ability to improve is still extraordinarily limited. One's always hoping to do better next time: to create better characters, to break out of certain patterns' (Biles 122). Talking about these patterns, and symbolism, she said, 'When you are imagining the whole thing, much of this

happens absolutely instinctively. Sometimes, one notices later on various things one has done … The total situation is thoroughly set up and you are thoroughly imagining it; then, many of these effects happen automatically' (Biles 124). 'In a way,' she said to Rose, 'one is just a slave of one's unconscious mind; but in so far as one can push one's work one way or another, I am always pushing myself towards a starting-point in experience' (Rose 65). At the beginning of writing a novel, there is 'a period of reflection – when one has nothing, except notes, of course, to remind one … it's a kind of deep free reflection which may be more difficult later on' (Heusel 4). She finds this stage

> very frightening because you've committed yourself at this point. … A novel is a long job, and if you get it wrong at the start you're going to be very unhappy later on. … You have the extraordinary experience when you begin a novel that you are now in a state of unlimited freedom, and this is alarming. Every choice you make will exclude another choice. (Meyers 211-212)

For her, the important attempt is *not* to control one's characters, to let them be free from the patterns within one's own mind. To submit them to the test of reality and contingency, to make them act as real people act, to avoid making them unnaturally heroic or saintly, to prevent them being agents of the author's fantasy or wish-fulfillment, is her ideal. So, paradoxically, one must try to be conscious of the creative process in order to surrender the control one's mind would otherwise unwittingly have over one's characters:

> Good writing is full of surprises and novelties, moving in a direction you don't expect. The idea of the myth and the form have got to be present, but one has brutally to stop the form determining the emotion of the book by working in the opposite direction, by making something happen which doesn't belong to the world of the magic … I am very conscious of this tension at the start, and I play it to and fro. (Haffenden 34)

'The intellect comes in very much to prevent … the plot from being coerced by unconscious forces' (Bigsby, 'Interview' 227), forces of fantasy and myth-making which would create characters who are not free.

She is tolerant, up to a point, of her readers' differing interpretations. At a symposium on her work, she responded to a paper by Diana Phillips on *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* by saying 'I think a novel is allowed to be ambiguous, I mean it's not surprising if people interpret a novel in different ways. … One could have read the book without bothering about the refinements which you've drawn attention to' (Todd 96). Because she realises that her intentions are not always fulfilled, and that 'in a way, one doesn't want to know altogether what one's doing' (Bryden, 'Talking' 433), she is willing to allow her readers a certain amount of freedom of interpretation. She said, perhaps a little testily, to Barbara Stevens Heusel, who was drawing comparisons with Dostoevsky and trying to discuss her work with her in Bahktinian terms, 'I'm just a novelist and critics are critics. If people want to explain something by saying that it is like something else then okay. Anyway we can't stop them, so they will' (8). She is, however, not prepared to surrender complete control to the reader:

> I am sure that people can go too far in playing these games, for sometimes this can be actually misleading, because somebody can see a pattern which *really* isn't there. I think out matters of symbolism and I'm very careful about names and so on; thus, the chances are, if there is something fairly telling in the book, then, that is something I intended. I feel there is a *small* area of conscious activity of this kind. … I should be surprised, in fact, if anybody pointed out anything of this sort in my own work which I wasn't conscious of, but I wouldn't rule out the possibility of there being an area of this kind. It isn't very profitable to look at. (Biles 123)

In fact, because 'a work of art has got to have a form, it has got to have notation, it has got to have something which is fixed and authoritative', then 'it

must have authority over its victim, or client or whatever you can call the person who is meeting it. This of course is a principle which is now very much disputed and even attacked but in this sense I am an authoritarian' (Bigsby, 'Interview' 214). With this rather severe statement, with its extraordinary use of the word 'victim' and its defensive tone, she is stating one side of the equation. Talking to an interviewer in Israel in 1995, she changed the emphasis a little, from the author's authority to the author's duty: 'I believe the writer is responsible for providing readers with real endings rather than multiple options' ('Writing, Faith'). In the nature of artistic achievement there is often, perhaps necessarily, a tension between the author's intentions and the reader's interpretation, and without this tension art would lose its appeal: 'If the reader or observer can do anything he likes with the thing then one result, of course, is that he becomes bored' (Bigsby, 'Interview' 228).

Her expectations of readers are not unreasonably high, however; she is not elitist. In response to Jo Brans' question, 'Your books are so full of meaning. Would you be disappointed if people only read them for the stories they tell?' she said, 'I would like the reader to see everything in the book. But I'm glad if people like those stories, it gives me pleasure, because stories are a very good way, you know, of getting away from one's troubles' (53-54). Asked by another interviewer to describe her ideal reader, she said, 'Those who like a jolly good yarn are welcome and worthy readers. I suppose the *ideal* reader is someone who likes a jolly good yarn and enjoys thinking about the book as well, thinking about the moral issues' (Meyers 224). In other words, she is more disturbed by over-reading than under-reading.

She believes a novelist should offer something to the average reader:

> A novel without a story must work very hard in other ways to be worth reading, and indeed to be read. Some of today's anti-story novels are too deliberately arcane. I think story is essential to the survival of the novel. A novel may be 'difficult' but its story can carry and retain the reader who may understand in his own way, even remember and return. Stories are a fundamental human form of thought. (Meyers 225)

She has said several times that the novel is a very versatile form, 'so versatile you can do virtually anything you like' (Biles 120), but she nevertheless has certain ideas about what novels should and should not be. Once more, the idea of a creative tension seems important. A novel must be comic, not tragic: 'a novel which isn't at all comic is a great danger, aesthetically speaking' (Bigsby, 'Interview' 230). It can be a tragi-comedy – 'good novels are tragicomedies' (Heusel 11) – but it needs to beware of satire: 'satire is a dangerous game unless you are frightfully good at it and have a particular end in view … Satire goes with allegories and fables and a kind of story telling which is not like the novel' (Heusel 3). The great writers she admires, Tolstoy and Shakespeare, are not satirists, and at their best 'it is very difficult to see what exactly what the author is thinking' (Bigsby, 'Interview' 216).

One thread that runs through all her aesthetic judgments is to do with the contrast between fantasy and imagination, which is connected with her struggle to create 'free' characters. She does not reject all fantastic elements, but

> if fantasy and realism are visible and separate aspects in a novel, then the novel is likely to be a failure. In real life the fantastic and the ordinary, the plain and the symbolic, are often indissolubly joined together, and I think the best novels explore and exhibit life without disjoining them. (Hobson 28)

Fantasy is dangerous to fiction,

> because creative imagination and personal fantasy are awfully close, in relation to fiction. The obvious example is the bad novel which turns out to be simply a fantasy of how the hero, who is the writer, triumphs

> over all his enemies and is loved by the girls, and becomes rich, and so forth. This kind of fantasy is a menace to the creative imagination. (Magee 534)

Realism is her highest aim, and she sees the novel as ‘a marvelous form’ which tries to show that ‘human beings are very odd and very different from each other’ (Bellamy 137). In this way, it ‘fights against the drama’ because ‘ordinary life is not dramatic’ (Biles 117). Here is another area of creative tension, however, because, as she said to Haffenden,

> of course a novel is a drama, and dramas happen when there is trouble. A completely harmonious life might not produce the drama. … In spite of the fact that people have a bad time – this is true of the novel in a general way – the novel is a comic form. (34)

Good novels, then, can be many things; however, they should be comic but not satirical, imaginative but not fantastic, or rather fantasy-ridden; their nature is to be dramatic, but this should be resisted; and realism of character and incident should be their goal. Experiment is fine, but not at the expense of plot, or a certain amount of determinacy: readers should have enough information to be able to work out the author’s true intentions as to the events in the story, although the interpretation of the events can be to some extent delegated to the reader. Above all, she values truthfulness: ‘Great art is connected with courage and truthfulness. There is a conception of truth, a lack of illusion, an ability to overcome selfish obsessions, which goes with good art, and the artist has got to have that particular sort of moral stamina’ (Meyers 218).

Social commitment is, she believes, out of place in the novel. ‘I think it’s a novelist’s job to be a good artist, and this will involve telling the truth, and not worrying about social commitment,’ which ‘can make the novelist nervous and anxious and not able to open himself to the whole of reality as he understands it’ (Rose 60). She once tried ‘to write a novel about the Trade

Union movement and put M.P.'s in it and so on, but I don't know that world. It's no good; I don't understand it and I don't want to write political propaganda in that form.' It is only in the novel that she rejects propaganda, however: 'I prefer to write political propaganda in other forms, in the form of pamphlets or articles' (Bellamy 133). This does not mean that novelists should or even could be amoral, however:

> A writer cannot avoid having some sort of moral position, and attempting to be nonmoral is in a way a moral position, an artificial one. … a novelist, a storyteller, naturally portrays his own moral judgments. But these very judgments are not just a small area of human discourse; they're almost all of it. We are always making value judgments, or exhibiting by what we say some sort of evaluation, and storytellers dealing with persons must constantly be doing this. (Brans 44)

'In fact,' she told Bellamy, 'in a quiet way, there is a lot of social criticism in my novels' (Bellamy 133).

Her own approach to the ethical techniques of writing largely, as one would expect, centre on her characters and the form of her novels. She makes a distinction between 'closed' and 'open' novels, and prefers to write the latter. She spoke to Frank Kermode in 1963 about the difficulties she had creating 'a lot of people who are not me'; and the

> tendency too readily to pull a form or a structure out of something one's thinking about and to rest upon that. The satisfaction of the form is such that it can stop one from going more deeply into the contradictions or paradoxes or more painful aspects of the subject matter. (Kermode, 'House' 63)

There is a 'moral challenge involved in art: in the self-discipline of the artist, expelling fantasy and really looking at things other than himself' (Magee 535). 'With what exhilaration do we experience the absence of self in the work of Tolstoy, in the work of Shakespeare. That is the true sublime,' she wrote in 'The Sublime and the Good' (218). This is a central tenet of her philosophy of

fiction. The expulsion of fantasy involves 'fighting against … and blurring … even destroying' the dramatic shape of the novel, 'because ordinary life doesn't have shape. Ordinary life is comic and absurd. It may be terrible, but it is absurd and shapeless' (Biles 117). Her desire for realistic characters different to herself does not, however, mean that she draws her characters from life: 'I would abominate the idea of putting real people in a novel, not only because I think it's morally questionable, but also because I think it would be terribly dull' (Meyers 216).

She is well aware of the danger of overusing symbolism. 'I think a writer of a traditional novel is wise to rub out or fudge over a piece of symbolism that is coming out too clearly' (Hartill 89). Symbols are, in any event, not always a direct statement by author to reader, but may be part of the characterisation: 'very often, the symbolism in a novel is invented by the characters themselves, as happens in real life. We're all constantly inventing symbolic images to express our situations' (Biles 125). She believes, however, that symbolism has not always been sufficiently under control in her novels, 'when it's connected with a dominating myth' (Rose 67). Nevertheless, on the whole she believes she is not 'a symbolic writer in any allegorical or complete sense. … I would want them to come in in a completely natural way … through the characters' (Rose 66).

Concepts of freedom and the many ironies and contradictions they entail are deeply interesting to twentieth century novelists. Murdoch's view is that freedom is only to be achieved 'only by self-forgetfulness. As we bec[o]me less obsessed by our own goals, drives and desires, and substitute involvement with others, we mature spiritually and creatively' (Heyd 139-140).

In 1968, asked if freedom was her main subject, she replied, ‘No, not now. I think it might have been in the past. No, I think love is my main subject. I have very mixed feelings about the concept of freedom now’ (Rose 68). In 1985, she spoke to William Slaymaker at length about the idea of freedom. She distinguishes between different kinds of freedom:

> This problem about freedom and unfreedom is, of course, confused by problems about political freedom as opposed to or as contrasted with intellectual, emotional or spiritual freedom. Of course, if the law prevents you from publishing your book, you are unfree, and if you can get the law changed, then you are free. (426-7)

It is, she says, ‘important to distinguish between a political definition of freedom which isn’t to do with having good desires, and a spiritual definition which is to do with having good desires’:

> People torment themselves – this is obvious, one needs merely to look around to see this happening – by unworthy or irrational desires: envy, jealousy, and so on, frustrated ambition. I would think of ‘true freedom’ as being liberated from these desires, and having desires that are higher, like desires to help people or desires connected with great art or love of nature or one’s work, trying to see one’s work as something really creative, whatever it might be. (Slaymaker 430)

Asked by Rosemary Hartill about justice, another controversial topic which often arises in her novels, she replied,

> I think the concept of justice is a very difficult one unless you use it in a secular context – relating to courts of law and how they operate, and what you blame people for. … I think the concept to hang on to is truth. Let justice look after itself. Justice suggests judging other people, and punishment and so on. Truth and love are much more fundamental concepts. (Hartill 85-6)

As for people’s responsibility for their actions, she says:

> Now a great many things which people do are excused because we know the psychological background to them which makes us regard them no longer as responsible actions. All the time one is balancing what one can find out about history and the human mind and all these things, these factual things … against these other factors which are to do with things which seem self-evident, with natural law, with a conception of human nature, with certain religious ideas, and so on. …

> In making a moral judgement you have to take to take into consideration a lot of things. A particular case is so particular. This is why novels are interesting objects; they explain particular cases in very great detail. (Bigsby, 'Interview' 221)

Implicit in these statements is a recognition of the difference between striving for good oneself and judging others. As a novelist, 'you can't help explaining characters and scrutinising their motives. The novelist is the judge of these people – that can't help emerging – and it is more difficult for the novelist to be a just judge' (Haffenden 35). This is an interesting paradox, because the novelist as judge is often criticising the characters for judging, as is the case with Julius in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat.* She is perhaps not totally conscious of this contradiction. Asked if all her characters were not 'at the mercy of the egotistical fantasies,' she replied, somewhat judgmentally, 'Yes, but they ought not to be, ought they?' (Slaymaker 431). Christopher Bigsby asked her if she saw 'any connection between the coercive plotters in the novel and yourself as a coercive plotter, a writer of fictions'; she replied, 'No, because it is quite different. … what the people in the novel are doing is working out their fantasy life in terms of some sort of pattern which suits them and I very much hope that I am not doing that' (Bigsby 227). In her interview with Bellamy, she comes closer to the problem. Discussing the myths that people create about themselves and other people, a 'mythology [which] is often very deep and very influential and secretive', she admitted,

> one is talking of something which in ordinary life – this is where the whole problem of truth is so important – which in ordinary life one doesn't necessarily see, which one guesses at. And one may have one's own motives for wanting to think that other people have a certain mythology, and one may be wrong. What is the test of this sort of speculation? … The test of truth here is very hard, and I think the novelist must be awfully scrupulous about playing this game of explaining peoples' [sic] secret concerns. But after all, it is the essential game. (138)

These 'persons who are imperfect' (Slaymaker 431) whom she is representing are, of course, imperfect in her terms, and thus throw into relief an accurate picture of her ideals of moral perfection. However much she may wish to create 'free' characters, she can have no doubt that 'any artist reveals himself to some extent in his work' (Haffenden 33).

Murdoch is a deeply serious novelist, which is, of course, not to say that her novels are not comic. Her moral thoughtfulness and philosophical training give her novels a compelling sense of a broad and inclusive tolerance, backed by 'an assertion of old-fashioned values, of the reality of virtue' (Brans 44), but she combines these qualities with an unembarrassed use of suspense and other narrative techniques which makes her novels compulsively readable. She rather disarmingly believes that all writers are equally serious, even the writers of bestsellers: 'I find it hard to imagine that even if one started off as a cynic one wouldn't be converted by one's own work' (Gerard 139-40).

In the following three chapters I will examine some themes and techniques which are interesting in Murdoch's case. Firstly, I will discuss her 'theological myth', the battle between good and evil, in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat.* The questions of freedom and justice are important themes in this novel, and there are some interesting differences between her intentions and readers' interpretations. Secondly, I will look at the technique of first person narration in *The Black Prince*, and how it relates to her moral concerns; and how the reader is led to understand the 'true' course of events by means of an unreliable narrator. The third chapter is a survey of four novels which focus on marital unfaithfulness on the husband's part, tracing a shift in her implied attitudes through more than thirty years of writing. Attitudes to personal

freedom, women's issues and social problems are considered, as well as her use of symbolism and its limits.

Chapter Four

A Fairly Honourable Defeat: Good Versus Evil in the Post-Christian World

It is a commonplace observation that good characters are the most difficult for an artist to make interesting. This was one of Plato's arguments against art: '[The] fretful temper gives scope for a great diversity of dramatic representation; whereas the calm and wise character in its unvarying constancy is not easy to represent, nor when represented is it readily understood' (*Republic* 336). Perhaps for this reason many novels are about not necessarily evil characters, but imperfect people, often young, whose progress towards maturity claims the interest of the reader, and who at the end are presumed to have reached the less interesting state of 'calmness and wisdom'. A writer who does not wish to glamorise evil may choose to write this kind of *bildungsroman* instead of trying to present a character who is good throughout the novel. The more difficult path is to foreground a good character who must deal with vicissitudes which form the interest of the novel. This, for example, was the task Jane Austen set herself when she wrote *Mansfield Park*, with Fanny Price as the central figure. The problem Austen faced in presenting such an unglamorous, passive and incontrovertibly good heroine is similar to that faced by Iris Murdoch when she dramatises a figure of good such as Tallis Browne in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* (1970), although their methods are, of course, vastly different.

Although we have little external evidence about Austen's moral philosophy, it is clear from her mature novels that she valued self-discipline, reticence and attention to the needs of others over wit and cleverness and a propensity to judge – very much Murdoch's position – and nowhere is this dramatised so vividly as in the contrast and rivalry of Mary Crawford and Fanny Price. *Mansfield Park* is a great novel, and its greatness is absolutely inseparable from the qualities of Fanny. Trilling famously wrote that 'its

greatness [is] commensurate with its power to offend' (127). Austen's courage in putting a passive and morally upright heroine at the centre of her work causes both the offence and the triumph: she deliberately defies the expectations of the reader in order to make a moral statement. Fanny's refusal to act to bring about the outcome she desires gives all the other characters an advantage over her in attracting the reader's attention. Austen counteracts this by presenting the novel almost exclusively through Fanny's consciousness, when the voice is not that of a sympathetic omniscient narrator, which ensures that the attentive reader with an open mind will align sympathetically with her and not with the more superficially attractive characters. She also presents Fanny, albeit with a touch of irony, with her prize at the close of the novel.

Murdoch's exemplary figure in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* has neither of these advantages. The narration is impersonal and apparently impartial, and Tallis' point of view is one among many in the novel. In the end he is not rewarded, and the last word is reserved for the satanic Julius King.

Murdoch has explained the scheme behind the novel in subsequent interviews: 'Of course, that book is a theological myth. … Julius King is, of course, Satan, and Tallis is a Christ figure, and Tallis' father (Leonard Browne) is God the Father, who finds that it's all gone wrong. … And then Morgan … is the human soul, for which the two protagonists are battling' (Bellamy 135-6). However, the novel makes sense without this explanation, and the mythology remains somewhat puzzling for reasons I will discuss. What internal evidence does an uninformed reader have to construct a moral universe from the narrative? And how is the realism which is Murdoch's overriding aim served in this witty and dramatic novel?

Although the novel is written in the third person, the point of view is shared mainly among five characters, with only occasional interpolations by an omniscient narrator who knows and can see more than the focaliser. A huge

proportion of the text consists of dialogue with no authorial comment and usually without attribution.

Statistical analysis has limited use in literary criticism, but it is interesting to survey the forty-four chapters of the novel and see how the narrative is shared among the five main ‘focalising’ characters. The count is Morgan, 12; Simon, 10; Hilda and Tallis 7 each; Rupert, 6; with the omniscient narrator providing the only non-conversational viewpoint in the first chapter, and Julius, clear of the chaos he has wreaked, alone and content in Paris in the last.

There is no simple relationship between the amount of narrative allotted to each character and the degree of authorial approval they appear to bear. Morgan could be regarded as the main character, in that more than a quarter of the chapters are focalised through her, and more importantly, it is her restless and irresponsible behaviour that to a large extent drives the plot. But it is quite plain, even without an explicit knowledge from external sources of Murdoch’s moral principles, that Morgan is not a character to be admired or emulated. Sympathy for her is tempered by impatience with her egocentricity. From the moment she first appears in Chapter 3, she behaves as if the world should revolve around her, and Murdoch surely means to convey an unfavourable first impression. At the 1986 symposium, Murdoch interrupted a discussion about Morgan’s exasperating characteristics, and whether the reader should pity her, with the typically modest comment that ‘it’s possible for one to take a simpler view here, which is that she’s just not a very successful character. … if Morgan had been a much more eccentric, interesting character, it would have been a far better book’ (Todd 100). The implication is that she prefers her readers to feel sympathy rather than annoyance with all her characters. Nevertheless, the fact that bad behaviour is psychologically explicable never makes it excusable in Murdoch’s novels. In *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, for example, she specifically raises the psychological excuse for Blaise’s sin, in order to

reject it: 'He was condemned to live in a sinful state, although his mind did not consent to sin and rejected it. Reflection about his psychology did not help him at all. Much of the machinery was painfully clear, but irrelevant' (69). When her characters rise above their psychological and social constraints and have the courage to see and do the right thing, however difficult it may be, we can begin to see the moral underpinnings of her novels. In her interview with Christopher Bigsby, discussing the Kantian and Platonic views of morality, she says she is inclined to agree with Kant that

> the recognition of duty … is a rational thing, that it is something which everybody can do, and that the unconditional nature of duty is something which is self-evident to every rational being. … This, of course, is a very unpopular view now; all kinds of ethical relativism are popular. … I think in a non-philosophical way some of the people in my books want to say this, that it is perfectly obvious what you want to do and if you fudge around and say well it is all very complicated and so on you are evading something. (220)

However, she goes on to say:

> Another image which attracts me and which is rather different is a sort of platonic image, the notion that good is very, very far away and that … one's task is to transform oneself, to discard selfishness and to undergo a very long process of conversion, … though nobody in my books ever gets anywhere really, or gets very far with the process. It is extremely difficult, there aren't any saintly people … there is only one real saint as it were, or symbolic good religious figure in the books and that is Tallis. (220)

We cannot take rewards and punishments as any indication of the success or failure of these efforts. Simon, whose instincts are often sound, has the courage to tell Axel the truth and is rewarded by Axel's forgiveness. Rupert, who is found out before he tells, drowns. But both Morgan and Julius get away unscathed and possibly even happy, after causing so much misery; and Tallis keeps on unchanging, his life in as big a mess as at the start, with no hope of Morgan's return and the black prospect of his father's death ahead. This refusal of poetic justice helps with the novel's realism.

Morgan's progress through the book does little to endear her to the reader, but most of the other characters seem captivated by her to some extent, which is another reason why she is not a successful character: it is hard to accept her popularity within the novel. The exceptions are Julius and Axel, and for this reason they are able to avoid the harm she inflicts on almost everyone else. She is often seen behaving lovingly to those she will later betray. Tallis is right about Morgan when, in reply to her statement, 'I'm going to be free and love people,' he exclaims, 'Oh don't talk such sickening rot, Morgan!' (212). He knows that freedom is not a virtue, and that loving people is often burdensome and unrewarding. The only character who is in any way free is Julius, who loves nobody. Morgan also, revealingly, refuses to allow herself to see the whole picture: 'so long as I can keep it all completely dismembered, she thought. Keep everything small and separate and manageable. Frame no general picture' (120). This is the only way she can prevent herself from breaking down and experiencing the 'ghastly heart-breaking tenderness' (120) which she would otherwise feel for Tallis; but ignoring the 'general picture' leads to a damaging limitation of perspective, and denial of responsibility for her own actions.

So it is clear that there is no relationship between the quantity of focalisation through a character and their moral worth; but can it be said that the more sympathetic characters are more morally exemplary? Conradi calls Simon 'hugely sympathetic' ('*Fairly Honourable Defeat*' 87), and it is a major compensation, in the disastrous outcome of Julius' meddling, that he and Axel save and strengthen their love as a result Simon's courage and strength of will, and his sound intuition about Julius. Simon also likes Tallis more than anyone else does, including his father and his wife.

Perhaps after Simon, Hilda is the most sympathetic character. Her self-congratulatory smugness at the beginning of the novel – less attractive than Simon's quivering sensitivity to Axel's moods – is entirely removed by the events of the novel. Her impatience with Tallis is understandable, although it is not really justified and is largely prompted by jealousy of her sister. But Julius' assessment of her as 'entirely truthful and genuine, unlike her sister' is quite accurate. As he says, 'she is a very good-natured and kindly person who doesn't think too much about herself' (407). This, combined with a devotion to Rupert comparable to Simon's devotion to Axel, is one of Murdoch's sterling qualities. Self-knowledge is, she says in 'On "God" and "Good"', 'except at a fairly simple level, usually a delusion ... self is as hard to see justly as other things' (355). Attention to other people as they really are, rather than as a construction of one's own mythologising imagination, is the path to good. Hilda, also, refrains from judgment. She tells Julius, in relation to his affair with Morgan, 'other people's lives are very mysterious. … One can hardly ever see what another person is like. … Morgan talked about it, but I couldn't really see – or presume to make any judgement' (293). Morgan is her sister, the person to whom she is closest, closer even than her husband, but she still will not presume to judge.

As for Rupert, well-heeled, well-intentioned, pompous, humourless and rather unimaginative, he cannot help arousing a certain amount of sympathy, but as a character he is surrounded by ironies. Readers with no outside knowledge of Murdoch's beliefs may initially concur with Julius' judgment of Rupert. They, like Julius, may find themselves 'wondering how old Rupert would stand up to a real test and what all this high-minded muck would amount to in practice' (403). Murdoch allows Julius enough justification for

his views to lead unwary readers to feel that his actions are also justified. Rupert's death would jolt most readers out of this opinion, and put Julius squarely in the wrong; but a vestige of contempt remains.

The more profound irony is that the philosophy Rupert professes is practically identical to that expounded by Murdoch herself in her non-fiction. Ramanathan points out that in the conversation between Julius and Rupert in Chapter 18 of Part One, 'the case against her own choice [of philosophy] is given the fullest possible hearing' (13). Part of her point is that no philosophy is of any use unless it is so much a part of one that it is lived rather than consciously believed. Tallis is the character, of course, who does not express abstract beliefs – perhaps is not capable of expressing them – but who lives the genuinely good life. Like Rupert under attack from Julius, he is unable to find the words to argue with what he can see is wrong in Morgan's philosophy: 'It sounds like sense ... but somehow – oh how stupid you make me feel' (214). Morgan says, 'You're not on the wavelength, you don't understand what I'm saying half the time' (215). This is precisely Murdoch's point. Ramanathan says

> Julius cannot be answered on his own terms. Another set of assumptions, extending to real possibilities outside the natural world, has to be called up before the argument can proceed further. … against such an onslaught ... belief in good can only stammer; it cannot provide the sort of proofs required, and finally has to fall back on faith. (13)

Both Morgan and Julius have chosen to view the world in a way which Tallis and Rupert, respectively, deeply feel is wrong, but their beliefs can 'only stammer' in reply. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Morgan's beliefs are a watered-down and fanciful version of Rupert's, that is, love is the key. It is this similarity of views that allows Julius to manipulate them into their disastrous 'affair'. But Morgan's understanding of love is

hopelessly self-centred, and only operates when she is feeling happy, hence her cruel rejection of Peter. Rupert's beliefs are deeper and more soundly based. He tells Hilda:

> I am sure love tells in the end ... There are times when one's just got to go on loving somebody helplessly, with blank hope and blank faith. When love just *is* hope and faith in their most denuded form. Then love becomes almost impersonal and loses all its attractiveness and its ability to console. But it is just then that it may exert its greatest power. It is just then that it may really be able to redeem. (26)

But he cannot practice what he so sonorously preaches. It is Tallis who loves 'helplessly with blank hope and blank faith'. He is not tempted to act in any other way. In spite of everyone's urging, and even apologetically, he follows his instincts.

But Tallis as a figure of good, someone for the reader to admire and even emulate, is not the obvious choice of a reader who is not versed in Murdoch's particular brand of Platonism. Dipple notes that 'disappointment [with Tallis] is built in very carefully by Murdoch and is felt as much by the reader as by Julius. The Christ figure as good cannot appear in the post-Christian world Murdoch insists on in the light of any sentimental or romantic radiance' (184). Further, 'Murdoch, who denies expectations of many sorts in this novel, alters both the Christ figure and Satan, and it is questionable whether the reader can follow her entirely in either case. Tallis' interest comes largely from his sheer peculiarity' (185). Although he is sympathetically portrayed, Tallis' messy, dreary life is unlikely to excite admiration, and like Austen's Fanny Price once again, most readers would find him an unattractive role model. Murdoch told Jo Brans, 'it's symbolic of the situation that nowadays the holy man is sort of shaky, hopeless, muddled, he hasn't got a place' (53). But, although he suffers, he is not vulnerable like other characters. He asks himself,

> Would this muddle just go on and on or would it end in some sort of final catastrophe? Sometimes he wished for that catastrophe, wished that someone would come and just cart him away. Yet he knew his

> own toughness and knew that in all probability while he lived the muddle would simply go on and on and on. (113)

When he is regarded as a symbol of good, this amounts to a guardedly optimistic statement that good will survive almost any attack, although it lacks the power to overcome evil. However, as personal qualities that the reader may want to identify with, Tallis' passivity and toughness engage the reader less than the more wayward traits of other, more realistic, characters, who make mistakes, and may either sink or swim.

Julius is a deconstructionist. He is an inveterate destroyer of other people's value systems and a demolisher of grand narratives. He believes that he is 'an instrument of justice' (431) and indeed many of his assessments of people are accurate. He admires Hilda, as I have discussed, and he is delighted by Simon's courage and spirit, even though, or perhaps because, they are directed against him; for example when he pushes him into the swimming pool. Conradi writes,

> the gap which lies at the heart of this tragi-comedy is that between the wisdom which is professed and the wisdom which is lived from the heart. It is a gap which Julius as artist is uniquely equipped to unmask, and one which only Tallis – significantly a man who does not rate himself as an intellectual – is able to overcome. ('*Fairly Honourable Defeat*' 93-94)

It is not Julius' perceptions which are at fault, it is his passion for justice, untempered by love. As well as seeing himself as a judge, he longs to be judged. He says to Rupert, 'If there were a perfectly just judge I would kiss his feet and accept his punishments upon my knees. But ... there is no such being' (226). Later, however, he tells Tallis that his 'picture of Rupert and Morgan is entirely just' (402), and his answer when Tallis asks why he has told him the truth is, 'Oh, you know why' (408), which implies that he now sees Tallis as a worthy judge. Even when he is flattering Hilda into trusting him, the line he uses is that he cares about her opinion of him – that she is a judge he has instinctively selected (296). Murdoch's ideal is a person who refuses to judge others, and who realises it is never possible to know other persons well enough

to judge them. Tallis refuses judgement: at the end of the novel, left suffering at least partly through the actions of others, he does not ‘speculate about the guilt of any person, not even about his own’ (443). Julius’ understanding of human nature is not profound enough to admit of such mysteries. He several times describes human beings as puppets, and is amused by how easy they are to manipulate. But he admits himself that ‘it all got rather out of hand’ (408), which means that his earlier claim that ‘no one would really suffer, that’s part of my point’ (234), was fundamentally wrong. The defeat of the title begins to seem more of a problem in this light. Is Julius is a meddling human being who gets out of his depth, or a Satanic figure who intends the consequences of his actions? In the former case, it is all more accidental than the ‘battle between good and evil’ schema implies; in the latter case, the self-deprecating confession to Tallis is out of key.

That Murdoch intends Julius as a demonic figure is, I think, fairly plain to a careful reader. Many of his appearances are sudden and mysterious, without normal, socially acceptable door-knocking or bell-ringing to announce him. His friendships are cool, and his affair with Morgan is characterised by a lack of warmth and a refusal to love. In the last chapter, there is a slight, easily missed hint in the sentence, ‘He was so much better now that he was not closely involved with human beings’ (447). The absence of one word, ‘other’, to qualify ‘human beings’ sets him neatly apart from the human race. There are also little, playful touches which might have significance, such as when Tallis tells him to ‘go to hell’ (339). Like a supernatural being, his physical appearance is odd and changeable; his face is more than once referred to as a mask, and his eyes are constantly changing colour. But if he is Satan, there is hope for good against evil, because he so underestimates the bond between Simon and Axel. And even Rupert and Morgan are not led to extremities of vice by Julius’ machinations. In fact, they both display delicacy, kindness and thoughtfulness until the strain of deceit becomes too great for them to bear.

This is not what Julius expects. He foresees an affair, with the comfortable accommodation of half-truths into the marriage. No one will be hurt very much: 'They'll gain a little experience. It will all unravel quite painlessly' (268). Rupert's inability to live without what Julius calls his 'condition of high-minded illusion' (383) is actually a good quality. He dies rather than accept Julius' cynicism – is this really defeat? Dipple says that 'Julius's major characteristic is his ability to pervert the perception of anything or anyone he comes in contact with' (187-8) but Rupert's vision is troubled rather than perverted by Julius. If it were perverted he would have succumbed to falsehoods and the convenience of the second-rate, as Julius expects, and advises, him to. As Swinden points out, 'Rupert … died because he was what he was' (256). Tallis is, of course, not perverted by Julius either.

Rice claims that 'throughout her career Iris Murdoch has proved to be subtler than her critics' (75). In order to test this novel's reception by some (no doubt, in some cases, rather jaded) readers, more than thirty contemporary reviews have been surveyed. They divide roughly equally into three categories; favourable, ambivalent and damning. Conradi is right in saying that 'few writers divide their audience so radically' (*Iris Murdoch* 3).

The faults noted by the damning group include weak, puppet-like characters (the dust-jacket of the first American edition had an illustration of a puppet), insistent design, too obvious a moral intention, flat and stilted dialogue, bland narrative style, lack of interest in or sympathy for the characters, brittle tone, artificial plot. David Lodge sums up the unfavourable reaction: 'Miss Murdoch must be getting tired of being told by reviewers that she is abusing her formidable gifts, but there it is' (317).

Some of these detractors admit to finding the book readable, but the pleasure of the text does not figure largely in their reviews.

Many of the ambivalent reviewers note that the puppet-theme (which almost everybody mentions) and the contrivances of the plot are a deliberate

part of the design. They often mention a cool, or even cruel, author sitting back and enjoying the suffering of her characters. They recognise her wit, and are for the most part entertained in spite of their reservations. Several mention that her people are viewed philosophically rather than psychologically – sometimes this is a criticism, and at other times not. Several critics in this category are looking for a moral message. They look to the closure for the poetic justice, and are puzzled by the lack of it.

The favourable reviewers write of a book that is life-like, subtle, enjoyable, 'tremendously liberating' (Reynolds), witty, fascinating, engrossing, with amazingly convincing characters, a well-made plot, and touches of clever self-parody. Anthony Paul, however, points out:

> People who complain that this novel is too explicit and schematic are looking for an entirely different sort of novel, which this only pretends to be. One may easily be led astray by Miss Murdoch's skill in entertaining, in dealing with locality, clothes, houses, the accessories of life and the luggage of traditionally consoling or life-enhancing fiction. But this novel is on the other hand a masque of ideas, jokes, metaphors, a dance in which every incident and thing has its place.

As this implies, realism is not, whatever Murdoch's intention, the final effect of this novel, and its realistic trappings are entertaining but superficial. Paul is one of the few who saw that Tallis is the force for good at the opposite pole from Julius. Obviously the blurb on the first edition made no mention of the 'battle between good and evil', as my more recent paperback copy does. Julius is almost universally identified as a force of evil. He is variously likened to Iago, Iachimo, Prospero, Mephistopheles, Satan, a cowboy, a scheming slave, and even God. As for Tallis, one reviewer decided, and made a fairly convincing argument, that he is Job to Julius' Satan (Rabinovitz). Few others recognised his status as a figure of good opposed to evil. Some assumed that it was Rupert who sustained the title's defeat. Rupert's status in the theological scheme is indeed enigmatic. If Morgan is the soul over whom the battle is waged, it seems odd that it is Rupert who is the casualty. Morgan, on the other hand, ends up out of the orbit of influence of both Julius and Tallis.

Would readers have guessed that Tallis is a Christ-figure, if Murdoch had not enlightened us? There is a deeply suggestive passage in Chapter 17, Part One, which describes his feeling

> a bond ... not with anything personal but with the world, possibly the universe, which became a sort of extension of his being. Occasionally the extension was gentle and warm, like the feeling of a river reaching the sea. More often it was uncomfortable or even horrible as if he had immense dusty itching limbs which he could not scratch. (208)

There is an echo of this a few pages later when Julius speaks contemptuously of the human dream 'of the extension of goodness beyond the pitiful level at which they muck along' (224). Mucking along accurately describes Tallis' life: one certainly needs to reject any link between cleanliness and godliness to see Tallis in this role. Later critics, for example Ramanathan, Conradi and Dipple, explore the Christ identification in detail, and find much evidence for it. Murdoch herself, mentioning the theological myth, said, 'I think hardly anybody notices this, but it doesn't matter; it's just something in the background' (Bellamy 135).

Barthes writes that the pleasure of the text is 'an oblique, a drag anchor, so to speak, without which the theory of the text would revert to a centred system, a philosophy of meaning' (64). It is noticeable that, in the ambivalent and even in some of the unfavourable reviews, readability and entertainment are mentioned in passing, as if scarcely worth considering. Many reviewers mention the scene in Julius' flat, where Morgan and then Simon are deprived of their clothes (the dust jacket of the first English edition depicts a naked woman, obviously meant to be Morgan), the unfavourable ones sometimes citing it as an isolated bright spot. However the pleasure of the text is a more delicate affair than is perhaps implied by this. Reviewers are looking for something striking to write about, and a man shredding a woman's clothes and then walking out on her is an interesting anecdote; but the real tension in the text comes from the pacing; the delays, the spurts of activity, the reflective pauses. Murdoch is, on the whole, very good at pacing her narratives. Her

propensity to relate the philosophising of her characters is very important to the moral framework of her novels. These passages are usually full of subtle ironies which can be appreciated by readers familiar with her beliefs. They are also probably the passages which many readers skim, or where they may find the book easier to put down. Deborah Johnson notes that

> the famous 'page-turning impetus' … which results from the strongly involuted plotting, the continual surprises, actually prevents a first-time reader from paying attention to the local dramatic strengths: the moments of extreme tension between characters, the sharply focused detail of the settings, the ways in which the language reflects psychological shifts of awareness. (99)

Perhaps the most common emotion her narratives excite is pure curiosity. She does not hesitate to use well-tried narrative techniques to heighten the suspense. In the case of Simon and Axel, for example, we do not ever read Axel's thoughts: we see their relationship entirely through Simon's insecure and troubled eyes, which means that the reader is as surprised and relieved as Simon by Axel's acceptance of his explanation in Chapter 17 of Part Two. Indeterminacy remains, in the timing of events, to undercut retrospectively the suspense aroused by Hilda's frantic attempts to contact Rupert from their holiday house, for example, and to increase the sense of the accidental nature of reality. Rupert is probably already dead by the time Julius makes his confession to Tallis, or at least Julius thinks so (427), so Tallis' prompt action may not have potentially saved Rupert's life after all. In a more conventional novel, it would be made clear that Rupert is still alive when Hilda left the cottage – her attempt would have the heroism of a nearly-successful ordeal, which it lacks if it were already too late.

The least effective aspect of this novel is the exposition of past events and the current state of things by conversation. Often the conversation is brilliant and effective. Leonard and Tallis bickering in the kitchen (Ch. 9 pt 1), Julius with Simon in the swimming pool (Ch. 14 pt 2), all the passages between Morgan and Tallis – these all work well. But sometimes characters

seem to be merely chatting, and the tension dissipates. The first chapter, as many critics have noted, is a flagrant piece of scene-setting. With a thin veneer of plausibility, Hilda and Rupert tell each other things they must already know. Perhaps it is when two characters are discussing a third person that this problem most often occurs: exposition by conversation is usually less compelling than lively narration. The story of Simon's meeting with Axel in Athens is narrated directly, even though Simon is purportedly telling Morgan about it, and it is far more satisfying than if it had been punctuated by Morgan's interjections, and couched in the more hesitant style of naturalistic verbal expression.

It is difficult to be good in Murdoch's terms. Rupert thinks that he can keep his life orderly, bestow love where it is needed, and live the good life openly and honestly, but disorder – or reality – overcomes him. It is tempting to see in this an analogy with writing a philosophical novel (which Murdoch denies she attempts). The ideas in the novel try to impose order, but the chaos of characters and events and the openness of the novel form overcome the neatness of ideas. Murdoch is profoundly aware of this. Ramanathan suggests that

> 'transgressions' of this kind necessarily occur because Murdoch's mind constantly moves back on itself, questioning the assumptions of her moral base, of its genuineness, its possible falseness, its inevitable inefficacy in the world, and its exhaustion. (6-7)

In this way, she is expressing, rather than a moral code, a philosophical position of plurality, uncertainty, and ambiguity in her novels, and in this sense she can be called a philosophical novelist. She wrote that 'imaginative prose literature ... is *par excellence* the form of art most concerned with the existence of other persons' ('Sublime and Beautiful' 278). Murdoch's characters are not intended as role models. Rather, they are 'other persons' whom readers may contemplate, and in doing so perhaps become more tolerant in their dealings with non-fictional persons, whose minds they cannot read. For this to happen,

the reader needs to be convinced – provisionally and temporarily at least – that the characters resemble real people, and in this aim, as is shown by the opinions of the various reviewers discussed above, she succeeds only partially.

The clear moral tendency of *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is against a desire for justice, because one human cannot know others well enough to have all the facts needed to judge them, as both Hilda and Tallis realise. But difficulties arise as to the ethical status of the author, who possesses all the facts, can read minds, and implies judgements herself, if not of all the characters, at least of the judgemental Julius. Can we allow that an author is 'in his work as God is in creation, invisible yet all-powerful', as Flaubert declared (Allott 271), or is there an assertion of superiority over the readers involved here which undermines her own moral scheme? She wishes to disappear in her work – she values highly the 'exercise of overcoming one's self' ('The Sublime and the Good' 216) in art – but in this case, the invisibility of the implied author behind the invisible narrator gives the morality of the novel a transcendence which is a little fraudulent. In the next chapter, I will examine a different type of narrative technique, which shields the author in a different way – behind a mask rather than a vacuum.

Chapter Five

First Person Narrative: *The Black Prince*

Many critics place Murdoch's first-person novels, narrated by a more or less egotistical and unperceptive male who is also the protagonist, near the summit of her achievement as a novelist – Deborah Johnson says that 'they constitute, it will readily be agreed, some of her most distinctive and thoughtful work' (2) – and most agree that *The Black Prince* (1973) is one of the best, if not the best, of all her works: Bloom includes it in his top four (1); Bove, in her *Dictionary of Literary Biography* article suggests that 'readers who are unfamiliar with Murdoch's work would do well to begin with *The Black Prince* … the most critically acclaimed of Murdoch's novels' ('Iris Murdoch'); and A.N. Wilson, writing after her death in 1999, suggests that 'it is possibly the last entirely successful novel she wrote' (80).

In a novel like this, which is full of veiled meanings, ironies and mixed messages, how does the reader decide where the truth lies? How can a narrator such as Bradley Pearson, who is patently misguided throughout much of the book's action, convince us that at the time of writing he has attained true wisdom from his ordeals? And what made Murdoch choose, for the fourth time, to impersonate her protagonist in this 'complex and brilliant exploration of the relationship between the author and her male narrator' (Deborah Johnson 35).

Romberg calls the narrator's situation when writing a narrative 'the epic situation,' and 'in a novel of the first person ... the epic situation ... belongs to the fiction,' and 'can, from the aspect of narrative technique, be an important key to the novel' (33). Further,

> the narrative technique, whereby the main character himself surveys his eventful life, or describes particularly exciting parts of it, or else lays bare his soul to his friend, gives to the author the opportunity to take advantage of the primitive but remarkably persistent demand that the novel-reader in general makes of a narrative: namely, that it shall give an illusion of reality and truth.
>
> The authoritative 'I' binds the reader more tightly to the fiction; there is a sort of two-man partnership between reader and narrator, and here we glimpse the primeval epic situation, where someone who has had some experience or other relates this experience to someone else. (58-59)

On the other hand, Wallace Martin claims

> any first-person narrative ... may prove unreliable because it issues from a speaking or writing self addressing someone. This is the condition of discourse, in which, as we know, the possibility of speaking the truth creates the possibility of misunderstanding, misperceiving, and lying,

whereas 'we cannot question the reliability of third-person narrators' (142). These two statements are not necessarily contradictory, but may refer to different levels of reader response. Romberg's 'illusion of reality and truth' may be the primary, naïve response of a reader – even an experienced reader – whereas the 'possibility of misunderstanding, misperceiving and lying' may be inferred by readers on a second or more thoughtful reading, and is often implied with more or less subtlety by the author behind the narrator's back. In fact, in recent fiction, it is difficult to think of any first person narrative in which the narrator is the main character, where the narrator can be relied upon to the same extent as a third-person narrator, whether omniscient or not. One interesting reversal of this tendency is Margaret Drabble's *The Waterfall*, where the apparently omniscient and reliable third person narrator is interrupted at intervals by her own first person voice, commenting on and criticising the narrative, exposing its distortions of reality, and laying bare its bias. This technique was perhaps suggested by the third person novel within the first person narrative in Lessing's *The Golden Notebook.* However, this reversal only works when the two voices are counterpointed within the same novel. The apparently objective voice is shown to be in fact subjective, and

this has the corollary that the subjective voice becomes the objective, critical and reliable authority.

In a sense, this is the opposite of what Murdoch does in *The Black Prince*. She appears to take full advantage of her readers' demands for the 'illusion of reality and truth' in the novel, only to unsettle and undermine them, not only in the postscripts at the end, but also in the narrator's addresses to his 'dear friend,' P. Loxias which interrupt the narrative from time to time. All first-person narratives must contain more than one point of view: the writing 'I' is necessarily distinguished from the 'I' written about. The temporal distance between the narrating voice and the narrated events is important here. In the diary novel or the epistolary novel, there is a closer relationship between the epic situation and the narrative, and this may entail a betrayal of the narrator's beliefs by unconscious irony. In a novel like *The Black Prince*, however, the narrating Bradley Pearson is a transformed character, and is quite aware of the ironies with which his former self is surrounded. He lets the reader know in his preface that a transformation has taken place, but explains frankly that he will 'inhabit my past self and, for the ordinary purposes of storytelling, speak only with the apprehension of that time, a time in many ways so different from the present' (xi). The 'ordinary purposes of story-telling' prohibit any but the most general hints at the nature of the crisis which precipitated his transformation into 'a wiser and more charitable man' (xi). Iris Murdoch does not tend to relinquish the privilege of a writer to maintain suspense to keep the reader interested in any of her novels. The technique of deliberate abrogation of suspense which V.S. Naipaul uses in *A House for Mr Biswas*, for example, holds no attraction for her. Narrative foreshadowing does appear, but serves rather to heighten the reader's curiosity, for example, after describing the day before Arnold's death and his arrest, Bradley continues: 'The morning brought the crisis of my life. But it was not anything that I could have conceived of in my wildest imaginings' (317). Thus we have the

situation whereby the narrating voice of what Dipple calls ‘the flayed BP’ (113) (referring to the deep mythology of the novel and its basis in the legend of Apollo’s flaying of Marsyas) is holding back his knowledge of events and his understanding of their meanings, and letting the ‘unflayed BP’ speak, nonetheless hoping ‘that the light of wisdom falling upon a fool can reveal, together with folly, the austere outline of truth’ (xi).

Within the world of this fiction, we have little alternative but to trust our narrator when he is describing the course of events, while suspecting his assessments of the significance of these events, and his knowledge the thoughts and motives of the other characters. This is indeed what he asks of us in the Foreword, when he writes ‘I have endeavoured in what follows to be wisely artful and artfully wise, and to tell the truth as I understand it’ (xi). That we should trust this truth – which is the domain only of P. Loxias, the ‘editor,’ and the ‘flayed’ Bradley, is an assumption upon which the novel is founded. Loxias’ postscript, following the postscripts of four of the other characters commenting on the novel and denying its accuracy, draws attention to their self-serving motives; their egotism in each believing Bradley to be motivated by love of themselves, and their self-promotion. So in the person of Bradley Pearson, we have a protagonist acting in a fantasy-ridden and prejudiced manner, but who we must believe was able to take note of the events and the facts of the narrative as they happened; and also a narrator relating these past events in prison, some years after they happened, who still has perfect recall of letters he wrote and received during this period (including the one from Arnold which he destroys) and who can remember conversations verbatim, even when he was under severe emotional stress when they occurred. These beliefs in the reader would usually go unnoticed; they are so large a part of the conventions of first-person writing. Consider the consequences if we allow that Bradley the narrator mis-remembered, or even misrepresented, any of the conversations he reported. For example, if Rachel had not been the prime mover in his abortive

romance with her – if the version of events in her postscript is correct – then the very foundations of the novel's action begin to shake. Part of the reason we are willing to accept Bradley's version of events is that it is backed up within the text by letters from the main characters, but the main reason is, I believe, Romberg's 'authoritative "I"' which 'binds the reader more tightly to the fiction'. Murdoch works to unsettle this illusion, but does not destroy it. Thus, we see that Bradley lies to other characters within the narrative – for instance, when he returns from Bristol, he lies to Priscilla about her husband's domestic situation; and we are quite willing to believe he is wrong in his opinions of other characters. Even the Bradley of the Foreword regards Francis Marloe as insignificant, 'an excellent fifth wheel to any coach' (xiv), whereas he seems to a more objective observer to be the best-intentioned and perhaps even the wisest of any of the characters. (It is he who suggests that Bradley distract himself from his inappropriate passion for Julian by concentrating on helping Priscilla, a course of action which would have averted most of the problems Bradley brings upon himself.) We are even invited to believe that he does not understand his own feelings, particularly in regard to his ex-wife Christian. He has a very definite idea of himself: for example, he comments that he refrains from returning to spy on Arnold and Rachel after their argument early in the novel because 'such an action was not in my character' (29), but he speculates in detail and feels a strong curiosity about what was happening in their 'strange and violent world … of matrimony' (29). It would be more accurate to say, 'such an action was not my *style*': he is crippled throughout the action of the novel by his anxiety to convince both himself and others of his artistic and fastidious nature. But although the character Bradley is sometimes a liar and often mistaken about the nature and feelings of both himself and other people, and even the narrator Bradley may be wrong in his beliefs about others, we are not prepared to accept that Bradley the narrator is ever a liar.

If this is the case, why does Murdoch so patently ask us to question Bradley's reliability? That she does not intend to create factual indeterminacy is clear from her interview with Christopher Bigsby:

> The thing is *The Black Prince* has got its own inbuilt mode of explanation. It is made pretty clear in that book how you should interpret the wanderings and maunderings of a narrator and where you should believe him and where you should not believe him. ... The epilogue is just play. I mean it adds, pretty clearly, further comments on the characters of the people who were in the story but I think it is quite clear what you are supposed to think. (216)

However, in an earlier interview with Jack Biles, she answered, 'Yes, yes' to his statement that in the novel 'there is no way in the world to know what really did happen. Which is what you were aiming for' (125). More trust can be placed in the Bigsby statement, which is in her own words, rather than something she assented to, possibly absentmindedly, in the Biles interview. On a first reading of the novel, it seems that the nature of reality is being questioned, but on a second reading, it is easier to see beyond the assertions of the other characters to a more stable idea of the truth and to understand that the distortions of the evidence are part of this novel's contemplation of the nature of reality and perception. Part of its subtlety is in the attention one must pay to all the details if one wants to make sense of the whole.

Bove writes, 'Murdoch's vision admonishes her readers to attend to others, to really *see* them as distinct and separate individuals with rights of their own' (*Understanding* 17-18). In most of her novels she moves freely among the points of view of several characters, which seems to be a more obvious way of achieving this end. In this novel, on the contrary, an attachment to Bradley is encouraged, so that the idea that he is really the pathetic creature described by Christian and Rachel in their postscripts is repugnant. The implied reader is inoculated from believing that he murdered Arnold, of course, but is also invited to excuse his admitted crimes and negligence. What else is he to do when he is about to escape with Julian, and Priscilla arrives demanding to be looked after? Leaving her in Francis' care

seems reasonable in the circumstances, given the urgency of the situation with Julian. In the case of the more shocking episode of what Johnson calls his 'virtual rape presented as an act of passionate love' (38) of Julian, his justification of the need to consummate his passion for Julian, which 'had come to seem a symbol of the whole dilemma' (279), before telling her of Priscilla's suicide and bringing on their inevitable return to London and the real world, is persuasive – and the immediate consequence is Julian's feeling that 'we are joined forever' (283). It is, as is so often the case in Murdoch's novels, his decision to keep back the truth, rather than his violent and impetuous lovemaking, that has unfortunate consequences; it provides a foothold in Julian's mind for Arnold's argument against their romance, although it is not until she reads Rachel's letter giving her version of the Rachel-Bradley 'affair' that she decides to leave Bradley. As the narrator points out, 'There are moments when, if one rejects the simple and obvious promptings of duty, one finds oneself in a labyrinth of complexities of some quite new kind' (278). Bradley is often unwise in his decisions, and impetuous and irresponsible in his actions, but at worst he is guilty of what he himself calls 'a semi-deliberate inattention,' a series of momentary rejections of 'the simple and obvious promptings of duty,' rather than 'a sort of conscious leeringly evil intent' (154). The awkward and sometimes intransigent nature of these promptings is, however, fully recognised and dramatised, as in all her novels. As Johnson points out, though, the compulsive readability has the effect of hurrying the reader past such 'local dramatic strengths' as, in this case, 'the ways in which the language reflects psychological shifts of awareness. These can only be seen fully if the reading process is slowed down or even halted for a moment' (99). Bradley's justification, when re-read slowly, is seen to be loaded with irony and retrospective self-accusation.

It is Bradley's inattention which provides much of the comedy in the novel. Hague comments that the narrator 'revel[s] in his comically grotesque

descriptions of characters, ... so that he can bring them under his imaginative control and limit their power to affect him' (107). Certainly there are comic descriptions of characters, often juxtaposed with darker, more sombre situations, as with Priscilla – the 'woo-woo-woo' sound she makes when crying, her concern over the 'things,' the stripey vase and the mink stole, she has left behind with Roger. But Bradley the narrator turns his comedic vision on his former self more than on the other characters. He is describing these characters through his former self's eyes, and his failure to sympathise with or to help Priscilla properly is treated, overall, with a grim irony. Dipple says 'the comic genius of [the narrator's] presentation consists in the risible contrast between the wisdom he believes he has and the tyranny of his compulsions' (119). Part of this presentation consists of refraining from commenting during much of the narration of the action. He alerts us in his Foreword to the fact that these events have left him chastened, and therefore the reader looks for signs of his folly. Of course, we can see foolish and worse than foolish behaviour in the other characters as well – Arnold and Rachel in particular. The point is that everyone is acting on their own private set of compulsions; Priscilla on the compulsion to leave Roger, Arnold to stop Rachel screaming, Rachel to enlist Bradley's loyalty against Arnold, Francis to make himself a place in the world by being helpful; and out of clashes between these compulsive sets of behaviour arise most of the novel's comic set pieces. We see at the beginning the foreshadowing of the delays and frustrations that drive the plot. Bradley

> was about to leave London ... I had my suitcases ready and was about to telephone for a taxi, had in fact already lifted the 'phone, when I experienced that nervous urge to delay departure, to sit down and reflect, which I am told the Russians have elevated into a ritual. (1)

Because he delays his departure (which we can see already is characteristic of his behaviour) he is home when Francis arrives to tell him that his ex-wife, Francis' sister, Christian, has arrived in London; he is home to receive the

phone call from Arnold which summons him to mediate in his domestic troubles with Rachel; and these events keep him in London long enough that he is still home the next day when Priscilla appears. Thus these three threads of the plot are set in motion, to ravel and tangle together until the novel's climax. The way all the plots jostle with each other, often in an accidental way, is part of the comedy, but the deeper comedy is in the irony of Bradley's incapacity to cope, his inability to think the situation through clearly enough to act effectively and prevent the final disastrous train of events. Murdoch's comedy might be called the comedy of accident and inattention, and it is intensified in *The Black Prince* because the narrator-protagonist is at the centre of most of the accidents, and the dilemmas and decisions that the novel 'lives through' are all his. The excitement and suspense the reader feels are all Bradley's, which means that when we come to read the other postscripts we are reluctant to break the emotional bonds with him which have been strengthening throughout the novel, even while alerted intellectually to the possibility of disagreeing with many of his opinions and disapproving of his actions.

This feeling of identification would seem logically to be a function of the first-person narrative, but it does not happen equally in all Murdoch's first-person novels by any means. There are six novels with narrator-protagonists. In the first, *Under the Net*, Jake seems uncertain himself of his goals, and we do not feel any genuine desperation in his attempt to find Anna. *A Severed Head* is such a comedy of manners, with everybody falling in love with everybody else, that it is only a source of mild satisfaction when Martin is accepted by Honor Klein at the end. *The Italian Girl* is a slighter work, with comparatively little hold on the reader's attention. Hilary in *A Word Child* wants only what he obviously cannot and should not have, and it is other characters we would rather see happy in the end. And in *The Sea, The Sea*

Charles is so patently behaving according to a ludicrous fantasy that we want him *not* to succeed with Hartley in the end.

Other characters for whom strong sympathy is aroused occur in third-person novels; for instance in The *Sandcastle*, where Mor loses what seems like a possibility of real happiness, in *Nuns and Soldiers* where Tim gains and loses Gertrude so often that the ending, with the couple reunited, comes as a relief, and in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* when Simon is reunited with Axel. There may be something vulnerable about each of these characters which is particularly appealing, but perhaps Murdoch is also trading on an incorrigible belief in the legitimacy of mutual sexual love, deeply ingrained in the western tradition, that makes it seem so important that these lovers achieve happiness at almost any cost. Murdoch's characters often tell each other that love should not be wasted. Frequently the love they are talking of is dangerous and inappropriate, and there is always an ironic twist to these conversations: sometimes the irony is local, at other times it is dramatic irony which becomes clear in the light of later events. Innocent love is another myth Murdoch's characters often subscribe to – Morgan, for example, in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, wants love with no responsibilities or pain. But when it seems that people apprehend each other, with what Murdoch would call real love, the accidents and outside forces which threaten these relationships seem particularly cruel – which is no doubt her point. She said in her interview with Bellamy,

> Love is a kind of bombshell that breaks peoples' [sic] lives, really falling in love. It's obviously a dangerous condition, because it's so tremendously self-centered. To really love somebody in an unselfish way is not perhaps thoroughly natural to human beings; certainly in romantic love, in 'falling in love' love, one is tremendously selfish. One feels that everything in the world has gone away to the other person, but then this becomes a function of one's own will, too. (138)

The self-centred life is antithetical to the good life she believes one should aspire to. But she also believes that art should express the accidental nature of

reality, and not be merely the acting out of fantasies, and Bradley and Julian's love is too fantastic to withstand the power of contingency.

In this case, then, the rebellion the reader has been induced to feel against the outcome of the story is certainly a part of what Murdoch would call the 'moral orientation' (Heusel 5) of this novel. Wayne Booth, in The *Rhetoric of Fiction,* writes of narratives where

> the narrator's bewilderment is used not simply to mystify about minor facts of the story but to break down the reader's convictions about truth itself, so that he may be ready to receive *the* truth when it is offered to him. If the reader is to desire the truth he must first be convinced that he does not already possess it. Like a well-written philosophical treatise, any work depending on this desire must raise an important question in a lively form if the reader is to care about reading on to find the answer, or to feel the importance of the answer when it comes. (285-6)

Given what Murdoch says about *The Black Prince*'s 'inbuilt mode of explanation,' and that 'jokes like [the postscripts] are one thing but deliberate and total mystification, a willingness to hand over the interpretation to the reader, is another thing and I don't want to do the latter' (Bigsby 217), we can as I have said, assume that factual indeterminacy, in the sense of there not being a stable reality, is not part of her aim. However, uncertainty about other people's feelings and beliefs remains important, and it is certainly part of her moral scheme. Her belief in the opacity and independence of other minds is fundamental, and in a way she is, in this novel and all of her others, setting up a situation (that is, Bradley's world view before the trial) where the reader's and the main characters' convictions about truth itself are broken down so that they 'may be ready to receive *the* truth when it is offered'. This novel may therefore be seen as an example to the reader of how this process works, as we see in Bradley the consequences of his blindness to the truth and his failure to really see other people, and we see also his post-trial calm and contentment.

How deeply behind Bradley, or Loxias, is the 'real' voice of Iris Murdoch is still uncertain, however. The idea that Murdoch chooses to write

in the first person as a male in order to distance herself from her narrator and thus create a character who is not herself (see Kermode, 'House' 63-4) has occurred to some critics. Steven Cohan writes:

> Murdoch's preference 'to be male' is in many ways central to her art. Her choice of male narrators allows for a playful act of male impersonation as an ironic commentary on the paradox of fiction writing. She uses the male voice to articulate a sense of lived experience unique to another self, while making sure that her narrators themselves remain bound to the limits of their own identities. (223)

She seemed to confirm this in a 1967 interview, saying, 'The oppositeness in the person of a man is good for the imagination' (McGill). Bellamy brought up the question in a later interview:

> Is your choice of men as first-person narrators a way of avoiding the introspective, solipsistic novel you have so frequently criticized? I should think that imagining you were somebody of another sex would ensure the creation of a character different from yourself. The process would involve quite an impressive leap for the imagination. (132-3)

However, in answer to this question, she said, 'I identify with men more than women, I think,' which seems to contradict this idea. Unfortunately she left unremarked an earlier comment Bellamy made to the effect that Bradley Pearson 'seems closer to the author than the narrators of your other novels' (132). Johnson observes that

> she is able to project her more personal sense of the connection between artistic, erotic and religious experience through the meditative narration of her *persona*, Bradley Pearson. … The mask of the male narrator … allows the author both the pleasure of projecting herself in a dramatic role and protection in exploring difficult and dangerous regions. (45-6)

In any event, most of the beliefs of Loxias and the 'flayed' Bradley correspond closely with Murdoch's own. For example, Bradley says in the postscript that suffering is a kind of false idea – 'no doubt we need these ideas, we may have to live by them, and the last ones we will abandon are those of dignity, tragedy and redemptive suffering' (337): as Murdoch wrote in her essays, 'The idea of suffering confuses the mind and in certain contexts … can masquerade as a purification. It is rarely this, for unless it is very intense indeed it is far too

interesting' ('On "God"' 355); and 'Masochism is the artist's greatest and most subtle enemy' ('Sovereignty' 371). Furthermore,

> art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed … it is in this respect a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world. ('On "God"' 348)

Thus, in the final paragraph of his Postscript, Bradley writes of Priscilla, 'may I never in my thought knit up the precise and random detail of her wretchedness so as to forget that her death was not a necessity,' and of Julian, 'I do not, my darling girl, however passionately and intensely my thought has worked upon your being, really imagine that I invented you. Eternally you escape my embrace. Art cannot assimilate you nor thought digest you' (339). These words show how far he has come even from his feeling during the trial that 'I had been confronted (at last) with a sizeable *ordeal* labelled with my name' (331), and that the book he would write 'is my gift to [Julian] and my final possession of her. From this embrace she can never now escape' (336). Dipple writes, 'in no other book has she taken a character so far, from irritating inadequacy to the absolute of art and thence to death' (131), and this feeling of a journey well completed is clear in the postscript. However, the Foreword, which also purports to be written after the main text, is more confusing. He says he will write in the persona of his former self, but sometimes it is hard to sift the strands, especially because the tenses tend to change:

> My life, until the drama which brought it so significantly to a climax, had been an uneventful one. Some people might call it dull. ... I was married, then ceased to be married, as I shall tell. I am childless. I suffer from intermittent stomach troubles and insomnia. I have usually lived alone. ... I have had few intimate friends. (I could not I think be 'friends' with a woman.) (xv)

Read very carefully, the changes of tense have a certain logic if the present tense is regarded as referring to the time immediately before the action, but some of the statements could be attributed to the narrator rather than the

character, and would certainly be far from Murdoch's opinions or thoughts: she surely could not believe it is impossible for a man to be friends with a woman. As a writer, he is clearly very different from Murdoch, with his pretensions, his fear of 'profan[ing] the purity of a single page with anything less than what is perfectly appropriate and beautiful' (xii), his 'pride, … as well as sorrow' (xvi) in having destroyed most of what he has written, his fastidious distaste for 'an intemperate flux of words' (xvii). Talking to Simon Price in 1984, she said, 'The poor old hero is full of illusions. He's not to be thought of as a great writer manqué. He's just a man who's obsessed with the idea of art, but can't actually do it.' (4) She does not explain how Bradley manages to write what is self-evidently a work of art. This is another part of the first-person narrative convention that the reader accepts, along with the exact memory of the narrator – the fact that this 'poor old hero' can write such a novel. His rival author, Arnold Baffin appears to be partly a caricature of herself, with his new book each year, his urge to write and publish and get on with the next book, even when he knows what he has written may not be perfect. The prose style of the narrator differs a little from Murdoch's usual voice, especially at first. Bradley has a more pedantic voice, a little more precious, with fewer Murdochian strings of three or four adjectives. These are interesting points but operate in the realm of characterisation or impersonation rather than moral judgement. I think one must agree with Dipple that the latter Bradley is as truly enlightened as it is possible to be, given that Murdoch says she can think of no people in her novels who achieve goodness; 'How many people do we know who achieve goodness? I think it's extremely rare. Even so-called saints are imperfect' (Heusel 5-6). However, although the fundamental beliefs of the narrator in his last days may be close to those we know of from Murdoch's other writings, the character she has created is in this case a distinct person with a vividly imagined life of his own, not just a projection of the author.

Whether Murdoch writes in the first person as a male because she identifies more with men, as she claims, or because it is easier to create a distinct character with a life of his own when crossing the gender boundary, there is a fundamental importance in the choice. Talking about first person narratives at a French symposium on her work, she said:

> I think it is a very important decision that the novelist makes. When I make that decision I'm always anxious about it, for I know that things will come out quite differently if it's written in the first person. The advantages of writing in the first person are obvious. In a way, they are enormous because you can then ramble around endlessly, you can address your reader, and you can produce a tremendous amount of verbiage which has got a sense in relation to the speaker. Also, I think, there's often a bigger emotional charge. ... On the other hand, the danger of this is that it's harder then to create other characters who can stand up to the narrator, because they're being seen through his eyes. (Chevalier 81)

She does not name the freedom that Johnson proposes – that it allows her to shelter behind the 'protection' of her narrator 'in exploring difficult and dangerous regions' (46), but this may perhaps be inferred from freedom she does name, to 'ramble around endlessly'. Nevertheless, in her later novels especially, she does not let the third person perspective hinder her ramblings. The success of this novel partly lies in the way the 'tremendous amount of verbiage' contributes to a vivid, rounded portrayal of Bradley, whereas in other books it becomes separate from the characterisation and in effect impedes it.

Could this novel have been written in the third person? The first-person form, as I have shown, is not necessary to engage the reader's sympathy. It may be that being only briefly privy to the points of view of any other characters – and even then only through their own letters or carefully-worded postscripts, rather than omniscient narration – that we are more closely aligned with Bradley's point of view than any other character. On the other hand, we can also see and understand his failings from our privileged view into his consciousness. The obvious gap between what the narrator says and the reader perceives is more marked in the other first-person novels, particularly

The Sea, The Sea and *A Word Child*, where the narrators are closer to themselves as characters, and are not so conscious of their faults. We do not feel that either Charles Arrowby or Hilary Burde have learnt a great deal from their experiences. The choice between 'open' and 'closed' novels which Murdoch has described does not seem to pertain, either, although John Burke suggests re-defining the closed novel as that in which we are 'by definition locked into or closed inside the consciousness of a single character' (488). At any rate, *The Black Prince* is, by her definition, a closed novel, and choosing to write it in the first person does not diminish this tendency. Nevertheless, in this novel she has come close to achieving a synthesis between powerful plot and fully rounded characters. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, claiming that 'few … perhaps none' of Murdoch's characters 'resonate in the mind, memorable as unique, created beings, returning to trouble or nourish us … no one remembers the names' (2), overstates the case.

One of the most important factors in choosing the first person for this novel is the epic situation which is thereby created. It is in the form of a confession, and it would be a very different novel indeed without that aspect. The story could have been related in the third person, it is true, but the reflections on the nature of reality and art would sit oddly in a novel told by an omniscient third person. These events are so closely allied to the perceptions and experiences of the main character that they lend themselves more readily to the subjective narration – in fact, they are really inseparable from it.

Although Bradley rejects redemptive suffering as a false idea, paradoxically it is his ordeal which has enabled him to reach the state of mind where he is able to make this judgement. Although he is literally not guilty of the crime for which he is convicted, he feels during the trial that he is

> guilty of *something* wicked. This picturesque explanation certainly had some force, perhaps simply because of the appeal of the picturesqueness to my literary mind. I had not willed Arnold's death but I had envied him and (sometimes at least) detested him. I had failed

> Rachel and abandoned her. I had neglected Priscilla. Dreadful things had happened for which I was in part responsible. (335)

He realises later in prison that ‘I surrendered myself to the trial as to a final exorcism of guilt from my life’ (335). The fact that Bradley judges himself harshly enough to feel that his ordeal was deserved, even predestined by some ‘divine power which held me in its talons’ (337), allows the reader to judge him more leniently. Murdoch is always more interested in explaining than either excusing or judging her characters’ behaviour. The reader may be inclined to accuse Rachel of being the villain in this novel, but this is not Bradley’s opinion, or Murdoch’s evident intention. We know too much of Rachel, even though we see her mainly through Bradley’s eyes, to condemn her outright, and on the other hand we know too little of her, as a separate and distinct person with mysterious thoughts and motivations, to be able to judge her. One point on which Murdoch and her narrator agree is their dislike for ‘semi-educated theorizers who prefer any general blunted “symbolic” explanation to the horror of confronting a unique human history’ (xiv), even though the particular theorist Bradley has in mind here is Francis Marloe, the only character whose actions approach, however distantly, the good life.

Finally, the first-person form of this novel gives it a frame. Its intention is clearly stated in the Foreword: ‘The elementary need to render a truthful account of what has been so universally falsified and misrepresented is the ordinary motive for this enterprise’ (xiii). No other Murdoch novel has such a definite close. Bradley’s life is over before the novel is published, and this fact, coming to us in Loxias’ postscript at the very end of the book, gives what precedes it more status as a work of art, a self-contained object which nevertheless transcends its boundaries. The fact that we have lived with Bradley through these events, and that he is now dead, gives the events of the narrative, in retrospect, a profounder significance. As Loxias says in his postscript, ‘death always seems to commit truth to some wider and larger

court' (362). In spite of the fact that Murdoch seems to resist closure in most of her novels, readers look to the close of a novel for some indication of how the lives of the characters are likely to continue, if not for the moral. For once, in *The Black Prince*, she has indulged her readers with the death of her protagonist, and a closing moral from Loxias, the editor:

> Bradley Pearson's story, which I made him tell, remains ... durable... Art is not cosy and it is not mocked. Art tells the only truth that ultimately matters. It is the light by which human things can be mended. And after art there is, let me assure you, nothing. (364)

The feminist implications of Murdoch's male impersonations are thoughtfully dealt with by Deborah Johnson. She states that 'the problem is complex because so much more is involved in Iris Murdoch's use of male perspectives than mere ironic distance and implied didactic attitudes' (13). The same complexity attends her treatment of female characters, and in the next chapter I discuss the development over Murdoch's career of the idea of the wronged wife.

Chapter Six

Murdoch's Novels of Male Adultery: *The Sandcastle, An Unofficial Rose, The Sacred and Profane Love Machine, The Message to the Planet.*

David Parker, in *Ethics Theory and the Novel*, discusses 'the suggestive fact that some of the richest stories in European culture over the past 150 years or so, many of those most widely regarded as "canonical", have been about adulterous and/or triangular relationships' (69). He goes on to point out that 'in these novels it is the dilemma of a woman, always a woman of some sexual vitality, married to a figure D.H. Lawrence called a "social being"' (71). This woman falls in love with a 'man Lawrence called an "innocent": he is in some sense at one both with his own darker nature and with "the great living continuum of the universe"' (72). There are cases of this type of situation in Murdoch's novels, but her more interesting triangular plot situations explore from various angles the male adulterer.

The situation of adultery obviously fascinated Murdoch as a novelist – as of course it has many other writers. Again and again in her novels we see a situation where one party to a marriage, often the husband, has divided loyalties. And the attraction for Murdoch is clearly the conflict of moral codes implied in these choices; not simply that one is wrong and the other is right, but that the choice is infinitely complicated and any decision will be a compromise. She maintained a belief in moral standards, despite what D.J. Taylor sees as the erosion of values after the war:

> The implications of moral uncertainty, social change and an accompanying linguistic failure for the serious novel, the traditional evocation of manners and morals at which the English customarily excel, are wide-ranging. … Novels about sexual morality tend to flourish in a morally stable society, or one that is only beginning to break up. Take away moral prohibition, and the traditional novel of manners is robbed of most of its point. (Taylor 237)

Murdoch is quite clear, for example, about the evils of promiscuity: 'I'm very, very hostile to promiscuity, which … does not occur in my books. … The

promiscuous world goes with thinking that you don't have any value. It can represent a kind of despair' (Mars-Jones). Nevertheless, A.N. Wilson does not think that Murdoch was out of tune with her times:

> As the novels of Iris Murdoch appeared, from the early 1950s onwards, there is a sense in which in they represent a phenomenon. They tell us much about the preoccupations of her generation … in some strange way Iris Murdoch explained a generation to itself. (81)

Her values, though, are not repressive social rules but a personal morality, which refuses to ignore the effects of behaviour like adultery on the individuals involved.

Of the four novels which deal with male adultery as a major theme, *The Sandcastle* fits Parker's model of 'social beings' and 'innocents' – with a reversal of the sexes – but significant differences appear in the later novels, as sympathy is transferred from the erring male to the wronged wife, and implied criticism of the husband's egotism increases.

The consensus among critics, sympathetic and antipathetic alike, is that *The Sandcastle* is a problematic novel. Even John Fletcher in his defence of Murdoch's reputation in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* says that in this novel 'the moral thrust becomes too intrusive' (547), and L.R. Leavis dismisses it as 'a pot-boiler' ('Anti-Artist' 139). Elizabeth Dipple, in her book *Iris Murdoch: Work for the Spirit*, does allow that the novel, in some respects at least, 'is better than many have thought it' (17). But only G.S. Fraser, in his early, appreciative article, 'Iris Murdoch: The Solidity of the Normal', sees the novel as a mature and successful attempt at the difficult problem of treating a 'very ordinary theme' (42).

The Sandcastle is Murdoch's third published novel, and is a departure in style and setting from *Under the Net* and *The Flight from the Enchanter*. As

Fraser remarks, these two novels are reminiscent of the early Aldous Huxley, especially the latter, with its 'puppet-like' characters; and 'people who enjoyed
these two first novels, were disconcerted by ... *The Sandcastle*' (41). The picaresque quality of the first, and the multiple points of view of the second, perhaps made the concentration on a single sympathetic protagonist in *The Sandcastle* a surprise, and the central romance which is the focus of the novel has drawn dismissive remarks about its 'women's magazine theme' (Dipple 16). But as Murdoch says, romantic love is 'a great subject for a novel ... because it's the central drama in the lives of most people' (Bellamy 139); and in 1961, she said that in writing *The Sandcastle*, 'my aim was simply to write a love story' (Barrows). Given Murdoch's belief, expressed throughout her non-fiction writings, in the power of and necessity for love, and its intimate connection with morality and spiritual freedom, it is natural that she would want to concentrate on a situation like this, in which different kinds of love are explored. As she told Rose in 1968, 'love is my main subject' (68).

The Sandcastle was published in 1957. In 1956 Murdoch published a paper entitled 'Vision and Choice in Morality'. She writes of

> positive and radical … moral attitudes which emphasise the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals 'taped', the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique. (87)

These attitudes are proposed in opposition to a 'universal rule' of morality. Elsewhere, she makes explicit links between this type of moral attitude and the aim of the artist. She sees the novel as 'the form of art most concerned with the existence of other persons' ('Sublime and Beautiful' 278). One would therefore expect that these qualities of receptiveness to others would be an indication of some measure of moral worth. *The Sandcastle*'s central character,

Mor, for all his weaknesses, has this kind of openness to others: it is this that makes him vulnerable to the emotions which get him into trouble. The language the narrator uses in describing Mor's thoughts – words like 'attend', 'apprehend', 'mystery' – often echoes that of her philosophical essays, and so do the ideas: as he anticipates his second meeting with Rain Carter, with whom he later falls in love, Mor thinks, 'Nothing is more educational, in the end, than the mode of being of other people' (67). And his unpleasant wife, Nan, is a representative of the opposite opinion. 'Nan hated eccentricity, which she invariably regarded as affectation. She did not, it seemed to Mor, care to conceive that other people might be profoundly different from herself' (20). But it seems that these qualities are also partly shared by Bledyard, whom most critics see as the moral centre of the novel. For instance,

> it was characteristic of Bledyard's conversation that he did not always attend to remarks made by his interlocutor, but pursued his own train of thought aloud. ... It was also characteristic of Bledyard that whereas he might sit completely silent for long periods at a social gathering, if once he did start to talk he would dominate the conversation. (74)

This sits oddly with his moralising lecture advising Mor, inter alia, to 'make yourself nothing in your awareness of' the other people involved in the situation (213). It could perhaps be argued that there is a difference between conversational politeness and moral virtue, but the difference is surely a matter of degree rather than quality. If Bledyard cannot bring himself to listen to the other half of a conversation he is involved in, how can he advise Mor to 'make himself nothing in his awareness of others', without hypocrisy? A.S. Byatt remarks in *Degrees of Freedom* that Bledyard 'has too much moral force for the events he is set against' (64). Bledyard, however, is dangerously close to proposing a 'universal rule' of morality when he advises Mor to 'do the thing ... that is right' (212), in contradiction to the novel's implicit value system.

Byatt also complains that the novel, in a sense, falls between two stools:

> in another book, what he might build [that is, a life with Rain] could have had less flimsy power from the beginning, and this could have

> made the whole less of a foregone conclusion; in another book again the foregone conclusion might have had more real compelling necessity and less consolation about it. (68)

The life he might have built with Rain is indeed difficult to envisage, but it cannot be described as a consolation that the defeated Mor returns to the victorious Nan, who, despite the access of self-knowledge and interest in her husband which has resulted from the threat to her marriage, still engineers the destruction of his future with Rain in an underhand way: Mor feels that 'his whole previous life contained him like a strait-jacket' (295). There is more than a little narrative sympathy with Demoyte's exasperation with Mor after Rain leaves – 'Nothing was inevitable here. You have made your own future' (307). The dilemma is presented strongly enough that novel could be read as a criticism of Mor's cowardice in not grasping his chance of happiness and fulfillment, while the consequences, had he done so, are not ignored: 'there would be a new life and a new world. But that which he was about to break would never mend, and he now knew he would never cease to feel the pain of it' (278).

In an interview in 1978, Murdoch said, 'Of course, the author's relation to his characters reveals a great deal about his moral standpoint' (Magee 535). In *The Sandcastle*, the third-person narrator stands in a clearly sympathetic relation with Mor, which is not to say, of course, that approval of all his actions is implied. It is significant that Murdoch chose to write this novel principally from his point of view, rather than that of Nan, or Rain, or one of the children. She has commented that

> it would have been a far better novel if I had spent more imaginative time detaching Nan from the story and not letting her just play the part of this rather tiresome wife but making her somebody with quite extraordinary ideas of her own, playing some quite different game perhaps, having some dream life of her own which is quite different

from that of the other characters. (Bigsby, 'Interview' 227)

It certainly would be a different novel if Nan excited the reader's empathy to a greater degree. The mistake Murdoch makes is a tactical one. By the time we are exposed to any sympathetic treatment of her, we have been enlisted on the side of her husband and his would-be lover, and the demoralising effect on Mor of her casual domination within the marriage has been well established. Her final ploy, which could have been regarded by a sympathetic reader as the justifiable act of a woman desperately afraid of losing the husband she loves, only confirms the earlier bad impression. It is also significant that Mor does not sleep with Rain before they are discovered by Nan. This allows him to accrue even more of the reader's 'moral sympathy' to outweigh any indignation felt on Nan's behalf. The reader's sympathy is more actively evoked by their daughter, Felicity. The narrative closes, significantly, with her tears of relief at the reunion of her family, and for her sake we are glad that her father has not abandoned the family. The only clear moral thrust is one that tends towards ambiguity, or perhaps the Hegelian idea that Murdoch discusses (without endorsing) in 'The Sublime and the Good': 'the experience of tragedy ... is the envisaging of a conflict between two incompatible goods. Not a conflict between good and evil but between two goods, which are seen to be such because they incarnate different real social forces with real claims in society' (213).

The introduction of the occult in the form of Felicity's supernatural beliefs and practices, and the mysterious gipsy, helps give the novel a typical Murdochian flavour and adds a dimension not usually found in romantic fiction. But, as Byatt says, the symbolism is not always sufficiently integrated with the action of the novel to work well. Murdoch explained to her that 'the gipsy, called up by Felicity's enchantment is, as well as being Felicity's familiar, an image for Rain's other "gipsy" self, that which endangered her relationship with Mor' (Byatt 63n). This is far from clear to the uninstructed

reader. The dramatic function of the gipsy is to appear and disturb the other characters, the most significant occasion being his accidental early morning ringing of the doorbell which startles Mor and Rain and puts them off their guard, so that Nan surprises them when she arrives home. The mysterious and supernatural elements are incongruous in this novel, which is primarily a work of psychological realism. They could be analysed in the light of Frank Kermode's notion of secrets which are ignored by many readers, and which are not necessarily under the control of the author; but they seem too artful and heavily symbolic. It is possible to read the novel without taking much notice of them, in the same way that it is possible to avoid the frequent allusions to dryness, for example. They do, however, play a part in building up a deliberate atmosphere of unease, and add to the sense that the course of events is, in some inexorable way, working against the lovers, which contributes to the force and compulsion of the narrative.

The Sandcastle is not a major work, and it is not one of Murdoch's best, but it is far from a failure. It has a richness of texture in its early chapters which provides an almost sensual pleasure, and the latter half of the novel is absorbing and exciting. In her 1956 essay, she wrote:

> Certain parables or stories undoubtedly owe their power to the fact that they incarnate a moral truth which is paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual reinterpretation. ... Such stories provide, precisely through their concreteness and consequent ambiguity, sources of moral inspiration which highly specific rules could not give. ('Vision' 91)

Perhaps this novel was written with this aim, and if it falls short of 'moral inspiration', it at least entertains and provides plenty of 'concreteness and consequent ambiguity'.

* * * * *

'None of her novels,' writes Lorna Sage in 'The Pursuit of Imperfection', 'dwells exhaustively on its subjects, or on its own language. The imaginative curiosity that is always left over feeds into a new book' (119). Thus, *An Unofficial Rose* (1962) could be regarded as a reworking of the love

triangle in *The Sandcastle.* It is, of course, much more than that, but the lyrical opening, with the elderly Hugh Peronett thinking back regretfully from his wife's graveside to the love affair which he abandoned many years before for his conventional marriage, puts one in mind of Mor as he might be twenty-five years after his affair with Rain. Hugh is certainly not an older version of Mor, and the other characters are clearly quite distinguished from those in the earlier novel, but there are suggestive parallels.

In the exploration of some of Murdoch's recurrent themes, such as the mythologising of an enchanter figure by other characters in a novel, the plots and characters are not always given enough grounding in psychological realism to be convincing and distinctive. However, in the case of the adultery theme, her novelistic imagination has worked well to give the situations she is exploring realistic settings and emotional justification, and too schematic an analysis of the parallels between these four novels may do her less than justice and play down the important ways in which she has re-imagined new possibilities. Thus, both Mor's beloved and Hugh's ex-mistress are artists, but one is a young *ingenue* and a painter, and the other is a highly intelligent ironist and writer of detective stories; each novel has its 'demon child', but Felicity is confused and pathetic, trying to use magic rites to influence events, while Hugh's granddaughter Miranda is clever and manipulative and wields more than her share of influence by force of personality and cunning.

Compared to *An Unofficial Rose*, the plot of *The Sandcastle* is simplicity itself. One interesting aspect of the later book is that, unlike those in many of her more dramatic novels, where people implausibly fall suddenly and often disastrously in love, few of the attachments between characters are new – nearly all have been formed or forming for years, and this adds to its naturalism. Among the older generation the situation is relatively simple; the recently-widowed Hugh hankers after his former love Emma, whereas his old friend Mildred wants him to fill the vacuum left in her life by her homosexual

husband Humphrey. Among the other seven characters, however, the network of desires and entanglements is far more complicated. Humphrey (a peripheral character) is attracted to Hugh's teenage Australian grandson Penn, who is visiting his English relatives. Penn falls in love with his cousin Miranda, who is secretly in love with Mildred's half-brother Felix. Felix is in love with Miranda's mother Ann, who is torn between him and her delinquent and estranged husband Randall. Randall is in love with Lindsay, Emma's secretary (in fact even Emma, Lindsay and Randall form a triangle of a sort). Lindsay is (probably) in love with Randall, and it is their romance which is at the centre of this intricate plot.

The novel is framed by narrative focalised through the consciousness of Hugh, a slow man, unperceptive to the point of innocence, gently selfish, and quite lovable. The quiet irony with which he is portrayed, with his rationalisations, misinterpretations and timidity, give the opening and closure of this book a charm which does not characterise all Murdoch's novels. Hugh's own dim awareness of people around him, and his imperfect grasp of the significance of what is happening at any time, begin and end the narrative, and this echoes the other characters' tendency to misunderstand, and to be misled and manipulated. On the first reading, therefore, indeterminacy is built into the novel. The narrative passes like a spotlight from scene to scene, from the mind of Hugh, who knows something (but not everything) of his own feelings, and nothing of anyone else's, with a slight but enlivening jolt to Randall in the company of Lindsay and Emma, his relationship with whom had been only obliquely hinted at before, and then to Mildred in conversation with Humphrey, where we learn of Felix's attachment to Ann and her own to Hugh. And so it goes on, the exposition in this case delicately and unobtrusively handled so that even the unexpected revelation of Miranda's destructive obsession with Felix, saved until Chapter 36 when her plan to separate him from her mother has succeeded, seems to come at its appropriate time. In other

novels, the withholding of such important information to the understanding of events and motives can seem like authorial cheating. In *The Green Knight*, for example, the teenager Moy, all along assumed by others to be in love with Clement, is finally revealed to be in love with Harvey, and this late discovery jars because she has been the focaliser in several parts of the narrative, and we are thus denied knowledge of a significant fact, for no apparent reason but to increase the dramatic irony. Miranda, on the other hand, has up to this point in the novel been a source of mystification for many of the major characters as well as the reader, who has had no access to her thoughts until now. Her actions make a mockery of the adults who believe they are acting from their own free will, or on the dictates of their consciences. (In this she is like Emma, and it is significant that Emma dislikes Miranda, seeing in her a rival manipulator or enchanter.)

One way in which this novel improves on *The Sandcastle* is in its more balanced view of the central marriage, and its more circumspect and intricate analysis of the dynamics of the relations between husband and wife. The demoralising effect of Randall's behaviour on Ann is well conveyed:

> The particular quality of her long battle with Randall had seemed progressively to empty the certainties by which she lived, as if the real world were being quietly taken away, grain by grain, and stored in some place of which she had no knowledge. This did not make her doubt the certainties. There would be for her no sudden switch of the light which would show a different scene. But there was a dreariness, a hollowness. She could not inhabit what she ought to be. (119)

Murdoch has named the struggle between Ann and Randall as an example of the conflict she often dramatises between the artist (Randall) and the religious figure (Ann). Discussing the qualities that can make a 'good character' interesting, she admitted the possibility of a 'demonic' or eccentric aspect of these characters overriding their 'good qualities'. 'I think Ann ... is a good character without being demonic, but then, of course, it may be that she's not interesting enough. There is always this problem' (Bellamy 136). Ann's refusal of happiness and lack of self-assertion does give her a dullness that

many readers would find not only unattractive but irritating. Ann rejects Felix partly from a sense of wifely duty:

> Looking back on her last interview with Felix, Ann felt that it had simply been a muddle. Yet deep in the muddle there was, there must have been, some decisive form. What had most struck her, before seeing him, as essential had been her image of Randall returning, Randall searching for her, Randall crying for her, and not finding her. She had been, at this, overwhelmed by a tide of pity and compassion for Randall, a tide she could only in the end say of love for Randall. This feeling, which was in its way blinding and suffocating, seemed to make it impossible for her to say yes to Felix; (304)

and yet 'she had not meant the words as Felix had taken them' (305), and 'if he had only seized her when he came in, if he had kissed her ... she felt she must have submitted' (305). She does not believe that Randall will come back, and even believes that her moral duty is perhaps to set him free, but she

> had never really had the conception of doing what she wanted. The idea of doing what she ought, early and deeply implanted in her soul, and sedulously ever since cultivated, had by now almost removed from her the possibility ... of a pure self-regarding movement of will. ... She was prepared, moreover ... to see in her absence of straightforward operative desires something corrupting, something deadening. (266)

Murdoch's narrator asserts, though, that Ann is wrong to accuse herself, and that she is calling 'her good an evil'. The reader is explicitly warned not to make the same mistake.

Ann is thus one of the few characters in the novel who does not claim the credit for Randall's departure with Lindsay, but few of the calculations characters make about the effects of their actions are accurate, whether their motives are selfish or altruistic. Mildred is the most active schemer as far as we know, but she is not the only one. One of the novel's many moral dilemmas is whether she should advise Hugh to sell his valuable Tintoretto painting to finance Randall's escape. She believes that if she does, Randall will take Lindsay away from Emma, which will leave Ann available for her brother Felix, but will also leave Emma available for Hugh, whom she covets

for herself. So when she decides to initiate this train of events, she believes she is sacrificing her hopes of Hugh. However, neither of these consequences occurs, and she ends up with Hugh after all – rewarded for her unselfishness. But poetic justice is far from satisfied in the novel as a whole (and Mildred's action certainly has its morally questionable side quite apart from the fact that it is to her personal disadvantage). The egotist Randall gains his freedom, and with the knowledge that if it fails to please he is free to return to Ann, who he believes, with justification, will wait for him indefinitely. Felix behaves like 'an officer and a gentleman' (279), and thus loses Ann, but he has the delightful Marie-Laure awaiting him in Delhi as a consolation prize. The Murdochian figure of good, Ann, like her later version Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, is left waiting for an errant and unreliable spouse, blankly and without hope carrying on her mundane life. Ann is one of Murdoch's 'saints', and Randall is one of her demonic artistic men, and their marriage looks like a wreck. But, in the ironic closure of the book, Murdoch makes it clear that Randall is likely to come back to Ann – in a sense he has never left her, as he wakes each morning from dreams of her, believing he is still at Grayhallock with her and his rose nursery.

Randall has a fantasy, lying in bed with Lindsay, in which he 'picture[s] himself based on Ann and the roses and having as many other women as he pleased without troubling' (292). This particular form of male egotism is worked through in two later novels. Blaise in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* (1974) runs two households for many years, until he is forced to tell his wife about his other family. Here for the first time the question of the wife's complicity in her husband's adultery arises, to be more fully explored in *The Message to the Planet* (1989).

There is only the faintest suggestion, contradicted by the narrator, in *An Unofficial Rose* that Ann's nature – her 'dreadful lack of vigour, ... [her] lack of any hard surface to grasp or to brace oneself against' (266) – may have involuntarily caused Randall's bad behaviour. Harriet, the wife in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, is also innocent in every way of her husband's love affair with Emily – unknowing, and guiltless. When she is finally confronted with the truth, however, her instinct is to try to control the situation by taking over and giving Blaise 'permission' to allocate time and money to her rival. The existence of Luca, Blaise and Emily's son, seems to make it all the more essential to behave fairly. This situation, however, is not sustainable. It relies on too many evasions of the truth. 'It was psychologically necessary to Harriet to feel that she had played a good, even an absurdly good, part. But she was aware enough to know that the sheer awfulness of the situation had an impetus of its own which was beyond her will and beyond the will of others too' (213-4). She can only sustain her 'absurd goodness' by believing Blaise's transparently insincere denial of his continuing love for Emily. She likens his predicament to a physical disability:

> Harriet's marriage vows had indeed prepared her to travail for her husband, and she had always been ready to. Was she to repine that the ordeal, when it came, was such an odd one? If Blaise had become blind would she not have read to him, condemned to a wheelchair, would she not have pushed it? (192)

That there is a significant qualitative difference between these situations and the existence of a mistress during half of their marriage is another fact Harriet tries to suppress. The turning point, the crisis which destroys these illusions, not only in Harriet but in Blaise and Emily as well, occurs when Edgar, the friend of their neighbour Monty, a bumbling, well-meaning but rather ridiculous man reminiscent of Francis in *The Black Prince*, drunkenly interrupts a party where all the principals are gathered, and delivers an

impassioned homily to Harriet which breaks the spell:

> No one here, not even you, is good enough to redeem this thing. They will not tolerate your forgiveness, in the end they will hate you for it, they will go on intriguing as they have always done, they will not even be able to help it, and you will find too late that you have not been a healer but an accomplice of evil. He must decide, he must choose, that is where he has put himself. He has not acknowledged his fault, he is continuing in it, and you will be eternally his victim, abandoning him to wicked ways and conniving at his sin. For his sake you must not allow this foul thing to continue. (210-1)

The chain of events consequent upon this confrontation leads inexorably although accidentally to Harriet's violent death, but it is nevertheless the clearest available expression of the novel's ethics – and Murdoch characteristically puts it in the mouth of an inept drunkard.

The narrative of this novel has the most even balance of focalisation between the three main characters of any of those under consideration. All are fully dramatised in their attempts to deal with the invidious situation, their rationalisations and evasions of the truth; and all are treated with some degree of sympathy, although it is undercut by varying levels of irony. The narrative voice keeps its distance even from Harriet, who is the most sympathetically portrayed of the three. Her desperate need of a love object after Blaise leaves her makes her a little ridiculous as she appeals to Monty, then Edgar, then seeks the fictional Magnus Bowles (whom Blaise and Monty have created as an alibi for Blaise's absences); and finally her desperate flight to Germany to seek her brother's protection is beginning to appear futile when she dies so absurdly in an airport massacre.

Emily is herself an ironist. She uses sarcasm in her fights with Blaise, attacking him contemptuously for his weakness and belittling Harriet (before she meets her) by naming her 'Mrs Placid'. She, like Harriet, wants to believe herself to be the one Blaise truly loves, but being more of a realist than Harriet, and also having been in the position of the 'other woman' from the first, knows that Blaise is probably lying to both of them. Emily blames herself for not

forcing Blaise to leave his wife at the beginning: 'If I had threatened to break with him, he would have done anything. I should have forced him' (67), she says to herself, but she is afraid of the consequences of any dramatic action on her part to bring things to a head. Her squalid circumstances before the revelation to Harriet, with her bad teeth, alienated son and busybody lodger, are graphically portrayed, but her shrewish desperation is beginning to put Blaise off and the reader may at this stage find it difficult to sympathise with her fully.

It is, of course, Blaise's moral dilemma which is at the core of the plot. His hand is forced by the appearance of Luca, Emily's son from their relationship, in the garden of his marital home, and he decides he must now tell Harriet about Emily before she finds out in some other way. Typically, then, it is not a brave decisive move but a desperate attempt to salvage the situation and keep it under some sort of control. His mental gymnastics are recounted at some length. He is absolutely divided between the two women, and he is of course honest with neither of them.

> Men in other ages and societies had been able to have two, or many more, women whom they kept incarcerated in separate places and visited when they felt in the mood. An elderly less-loved wife could be retained as an amiable companion, or simply out of pity, and should feel no resentment at that. A man, any man, surely needed various women, there were so many possibilities and styles of love and affection and habit. Why should some of them automatically exclude the others? He led a double life. Did that make him a liar? He did not feel a liar. He was a man of two truths, since both these lives were valuable and true. (80)

The egotism of this train of thought, and its sexism, are plain. Blaise exalts his selfish desires into a rational system of belief. He and Emily share a physical bond which the narrator refers to as 'peculiarity' or 'strangeness', presumably some form of sado-masochism, and this justifies them at the beginning: 'sin was an awful private happiness blotting out all else; only it was not sin, it was glory, it was his good, his very own, manifested at last' (72). Expressed like this, his love for Emily acquires an almost spiritual status. When he is living

with her in their new flat, having left Harriet, he feels at first that their 'intense mutual erotic love, love which involves with the flesh all the most refined sexual being of the spirit, which reveals and perhaps even *ex nihilo* creates spirit as sex' (261), creates its own justification. This passage calls into question the natural assumption that the sacred love of the title is Harriet, and the profane Emily. In his affair with Emily, it has been a matter of reproach that Blaise has settled for second-best in his marriage, while Emily has 'remained true to her deep thing' (72). His materially secure and rather mundane relationship with Harriet could then be seen as a type of profanity. However, there are two moral systems operating here (calling to mind Parker's idea of the conflict of the Romantic and the Judeao-Christian ideals) and it is explicitly stated elsewhere that Blaise has felt 'that Harriet was his sacred love and Emily his profane' (342). What is clear is that Blaise feels justified in his double life, and has not the moral strength and imagination to act rightly at first, and to conduct himself creditably later on. The narrator makes it clear that the cage which he finds himself inside is 'made of long wrong-doing' (216), and although he believes his sin to be a good, it is still a sin. The other part of the title, the machine, refers to the automatic, unstoppable series of 'deep inevitable consequences' (261) that attend upon this wrong-doing, a Murdochian theme that occurs again and again in her novels, and an image which appears frequently in the text – characters are caught in machines, made from their own actions and those of others, but they are also often described, mind and body, as mechanical in themselves.

The fact that Harriet is disposed of so fortuitously gives Emily an unexpected and complete victory over her. We see her happiness at her new status as Blaise's wife, as she and Blaise work 'silently, surreptitiously, feverishly, like people trying to conceal a crime, to erase all traces of Harriet's existence' (339), but Murdoch balances this by sixteen-year-old David's terrible grief at his mother's death and alienation from his father, as well as

eight-year-old Luca's retreat into silence after the shock of witnessing Harriet's violent death. The novel could logically end with Emily, pregnant again, seeing her future stretching 'out before her like a golden land' (346). However, there follows a coda in which the focus moves to Edgar, whose 'testimony' has been so crucial in the chain of events, but who has otherwise had a fairly small part to play in the novel. Part of the function of this passage is to recount his conversation with David, where we can see his unhappiness contrasted with Emily's joy, but then it moves off to concentrate on Edgar's personal story, about which the narrative has previously concerned itself hardly at all. Edgar is one of the survivors. He is able to be optimistic and overcome his grief and look forward to a new beginning, as perhaps David will as well, it is hinted, and even perhaps Luca, whose case the psychiatrists 'did not regard … as hopeless' (337). Life goes on, the dead are left behind, if not forgotten. Ending there, with several new beginnings, may be principally designed to make the novel more open – 'a reminder that there is another world outside the work of art' such as Murdoch writes of in *Metaphysics as a Guide To Morals* (195), and, characteristically, to resist closure.

* * * * *

The Message to the Planet is a large book and contains two fairly loosely linked plots. The primary narrative concerns a young historian, Ludens, and his frantic attempts to wrest the meaning of life from the tiresomely enigmatic sage Marcus Vallar – one of Murdoch's enchanter figures who exert an implausible influence on other characters. The secondary plot concerns a more humanly involving and realistic triangular situation between the egotistical painter Jack Sheerwater, his wife Franca, and his young girlfriend Alison.

In this case, the focus has shifted entirely to the wife. Her point of view is the only one of the three which is dramatised, and her dilemma is explored in depth, so that it becomes irrelevant within the moral scheme what Jack or

Alison decide to do, even though they are *prima facie* the guilty parties.

The new element in this triangle is that Franca has known about Jack's infidelities and has forgiven him, condoning his affairs so as to keep the peace with him. If it is part of the moral framework of *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* that Blaise's deceit is a major cause of the tragedy, this novel re-examines this idea by exploring the 'open marriage' where deceit is explicitly excluded (which does not mean that it is not implicitly present). Jack affects to believe that 'the bad thing about adultery was the lying, that was the poison' (26), and proceeds to have affairs whenever he pleases, keeping Franca informed and always declaring that she is his permanent, eternal love. She feels at first that she must accept this: 'It did not occur to her that she might be pitied, she did not think of herself as a wronged or defeated woman. Her love connived at what she now took to be inevitable' (26). On this basis their marriage continues for some years. At the point where the novel begins, however, Jack is conducting an affair with the 24-year-old Alison, and he decides to offer her a permanent relationship. Franca is to remain his wife, and to continue living in the matrimonial home with them as a kind of dowager wife. She has long trained herself to hide her feelings: 'Of course she uttered no reproaches and learnt to conceal her unhappiness, to conceal it even from herself' (26). The breathtaking solipsism of Jack's assumption that she will be content with this new arrangement is made possible by her continued concealment of her feelings from him, but she finds it increasingly difficult to conceal them from herself. Behind her calm exterior she seethes, entertaining fantasies of murder and worse.

> At one time, even lately, she had thought that she could bear it, turning it all into pure love. She had imprisoned her anger and hate in a part of her mind, as something unworthy which could be overcome. Jack had said, and said again and again, that all would be well provided no one told lies. But now she herself, her mind and her heart, was composed entirely of lies, the anger and the hate were everywhere, and worse, the calculation, the conspiracy, the dreams of revenge. (171-2)

Even when she breaks down and confesses her real feelings to Ludens, he does

not believe she means it: 'You've simply got to *live* this, *be* kind and good, be what you're really like, be patient' (234). Her reaction is to wonder if he is right, 'Can one simply, in the name of truth or good, carrying it like a banner, deny the existence of such a fierce awful tumult?' (234).

Shortly after this conversation with Ludens, she tells her new friend, the American painter Maisie Tether, about her situation, and finds someone who echoes her thoughts, even though she denies them herself: 'So you collude in a situation which demeans you, and exposes him as a rotter. ... I find this disgusting, I pity you' (250). Franca, although she argues with Maisie, looks back at these remarks and finds them 'invigorating' (253). Maisie thus plays a similar role to that of Edgar in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, but where Edgar's truth gives Harriet only momentary strength which propels her on an ill-fated journey to seek her brother's protection, Franca is fortified by Maisie to the point of deciding to abandon Jack. She is just about to leave for America to join Maisie, having left a letter telling Jack of her decision, when she discovers, before Jack knows, that Alison has left him as well. She has the choice, through chance, of intercepting Alison's letter telling she has left him, or her own. Franca decides to destroy her own letter and return to him. Thus her love for and loyalty to Jack overrides her pride:

> I can't fight, not against *him*, whatever pains there be, for I do love him eternally. As for the future, there might be bitter tears, but she felt that whatever the suffering she had fought the battle of it already. She had fought rightly, and been perfectly defeated, and that was right too. (539)

Jack is not to suffer for his behaviour, and for once I believe Murdoch has weighted the scales against romantic love and in favour of independence and pride. There is disappointment built into this 'happy ending'.

* * * * *

Murdoch does not write as a 'woman's author'. Nevertheless, it seems that in the case of this particular theme, her sympathies have undergone a change over the years. After *The Sandcastle*, with its sympathetic male (would-be)

adulterer and unsympathetic wife, she has, in this procession of novels, shifted her authorial approval from the husbands to the wives, in keeping with her self-criticism about Nan's limitations as a character. She has said that she is 'not interested in women's problems as such' and that 'one's just a human being' (Bellamy 133), and that 'the ordinary human condition still seems to belong more to a man than to a woman' (Biles 119), so she usually prefers to write about men; but the problems her male adulterers face are generally typical of their sex in her fictional world. They struggle to reconcile their imagined need for more than one woman with the reluctance of their women to share (and note Blaise's jealousy when he suspects either of his women of having an interest in another man). They want, in short, to have it all with impunity. Unfaithful wives like Midge in *The Good Apprentice* and Jean in *The Book and The Brotherhood* naturally face conflicts of loyalties as well, but they do not imagine that they can continue both relationships indefinitely the way Blaise and Jack do, or expect their spouses to wait for them indefinitely as Randall does. In each of these husbands, the conflict between the two strands of morality, the Judaeo-Christian-Kantian and the Romantic-Enlightenment-Nietzschean (Parker 37), is dramatised. Mor is tugged both ways, and Randall feels the pull of the Romantic morality more than the social: he is fascinated by the idea that Lindsay and Emma obey a moral code quite different from what he is familiar with. He says to Lindsay, '*Your* morality is not [depressing] ... It invigorates, it inspires, it gives life' (*Unofficial* 124). Jack, it seems, believes he can honour both strands, but ends up happily finding that passion and duty can in the end be reconciled. Blaise practically embodies both, and the resultant split in his loyalties is fatal – if it had not killed Harriet, something or someone else would have been destroyed – and he finds when his

profane love Emily becomes his wife, their relationship subtly changes: 'The fact of being *married* to Emily came to him with a kind of shock of innocence and blankness, like a very white light, and while it made him feel deeply tender towards her it seemed to diminish their old vertiginous feeling of a unique kinship' (*Sacred* 342). In a way, these men resemble a bad novelist, whose 'drive to resolve all conflicts' causes their work to become 'schematic, shallow, sentimental, evasive, insistent, or non-explanatory' (Parker 57). Their lives exhibit some of these qualities – Randall's shallowness, Blaise's evasiveness, and Jack's sentimentality all spring to mind.

It is interesting to consider where the 'goodness' of the wives in the later three novels resides, given Murdoch's philosophical stance. Ann is good in Murdoch's classic way. She has schooled herself in good behaviour as Murdoch recommends in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals:*

> The whole of morality involves the discipline of desire which leads to instinctive good action. This slow discipline, this gradual shift of inclination, is less visible, and indeed less interesting, than the dramatic head-on encounters between duty and interest, or duty and passion, which can be so effectively displayed and explored in literature. (384)

But in what way does her acceptance of Randall's behaviour – or at least her failure to reject him – differ from Harriet and Franca's condoning of evil? All three are traditional good wives – faithful home makers, unambitious for themselves, supportive of their husbands' work, quiet and undramatic. But in Franca, the 'discipline of desire' has cost too much, and it is obvious that her 'good behaviour' is a facade behind which bitter and revengeful feelings are barely concealed, and that although she smiles over the thought that she 'might be in danger of actually becoming as saintly as I seem' (155), she is on a more reliable path to a good life by following Maisie Tether's advice and refusing to martyr herself. Harriet's attempts to be good, like Franca's, are partly to do with maintaining a favourable self-image, but the shock to her long habit of

trusting and loving Blaise leaves her without any refuge such as that Franca has in Maisie, and her violent death almost seems the only viable solution to her problems as well as those of Blaise and Emily: her dreadful misery is, at least, at an end. In this way, having created an ideal figure of good in Ann, Murdoch subjects this ideal to increasing stress to see how it will break.

In a review of *The Message to the Planet*, Paul Duguid wrote that Murdoch's novels 'collectively resemble an artist's insistent attempt to keep reworking a subject until the right picture emerges'. In these four novels, we can see her mind at work on the theme of male adultery, if not seeking a 'right' picture, at least considering the implications, in each case, of a similar situation is altered in one or two important ways. The 'facts' change – which of the characters knows about the adulterous relationship, what they believe about it, whether or not there are children involved – but also, just as importantly, the point of view alters. The particularities of all these situations are, as I have said, vital to an understanding of their moral structure. But the particularities themselves have been given their arrangement by an author who is herself a moral agent, and Eagleton notes that 'it impoverishes the literary to see it as all particularity, just as it travesties the political to see it as all abstraction' ('Is Theory'). Thus Murdoch made the decision to tell Mor's side of the story in *The Sandcastle*, and then to give equal time to Randall and Ann in *An Unofficial Rose*, to include Emily as well as the married couple in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, and finally to focus only on Franca in *The Message to the Planet*. It is tempting to read into this progression an increasing sympathy with feminism: Johnson observes that 'in general, the opening out of the plot-structures brings with it a liberation of the female characters' (70). However, there is a parallel with these adultery plots in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, where Tallis, the wronged husband, becomes the figure of good, trapped in his dreary life, passively waiting for his circumstances to change, while Morgan is an egotist who believes she is free,

and indeed has a freedom of movement traditionally available only to men. Caution is advisable before making generalisations about trends based on a small selection of examples.

The morality of these novels is complex. It is important, as Murdoch insists in her moral philosophy, to try to live well and unselfishly, but the 'slow discipline of desire' (*Metaphysics* 384) is easier to describe than to enact. Another review of *The Message to the Planet*, by Anatole Broyard, quotes her have as having said 'that good art is philosophy swimming, or philosophy drowning.' He goes on, 'it may be too that fiction is her revenge on philosophy.' It is the place where she tests her philosophical ideas and, often, implicitly finds them wanting; but it also provides the field for a struggle between her philosophy of fiction and her novelistic instincts in which the casualty has been, increasingly over her career, the very illusion of realism which is her highest aim. However, in these novels, the adultery theme has provided scope for her exploration of ethical questions without the intrusion of the bizarre. Sexual passion and jealousy cause enough eccentric behaviour to create narrative tension without the need to invent the kind of wild and improbable situations and odd characters which have often characterised her later novels.

Chapter Seven

Iris Murdoch: Conclusion

How do Murdoch's novels live up to her ideals as she has expressed them outside her fiction? She has developed an ethical view of what novels should be, not based on the way she can best use her particular talents, but on what James Wood calls 'a stern metaphysics' ('Iris Murdoch' 183). Her most important aim is to create 'free' characters in 'open' novels. She is conscious of failing to achieve this aim, but to what extent do her opinions about the nature of that failure correspond with those of her readers?

She said in 1986 that she thought her later novels were better:

> I think in novels with a great many characters one just has more successful ones because they have a larger field to play in. The danger with a very strong plot and a few very strong characters is that other characters, perhaps, haven't got any space in which to develop themselves. I think there's more detail in general in the later novels. They are longer novels, and there's more opportunity for descriptions of all kinds, and I think they are more realistic. The characters are better, and I think this is the main thing, to be able to invent characters who have a life of their own, who seem to exist, and who may not be obviously like ordinary people at all, but then they may be what ordinary people are like in the eyes of God, as it were. I think the advantage of the novelist is that he can see into the soul. (Todd 101)

Characters who have a life of their own, one would expect, would live on in the reader's memory long after the novel had been read, and would seem to amount to more than their physical description and their thoughts and utterances – in other words, they would be more than the sum of their parts. Murdoch has created so many characters in her career that it is not surprising that certain types recur. There are certain peculiarities which keep appearing – many middle-aged people are childless, for example; hardly anyone, in the age of the supremacy of television, owns a set – they prefer the radio; and women setting up new households with their lovers, however temporary, delight in

buying domestic utensils – even characters as different as Emily in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* and Julian in *The Black Prince.* She has, nevertheless, succeeded in creating some 'real people' who remain in the memory. It is not, in spite of her belief to the contrary, in the later novels that most of these people appear. They tend to be characters seen principally from the outside, as is natural: an outside view can show memorable idiosyncratic details which are not registered via the inside view, except via contrived views in mirrors. Both Simon and Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* remain in the memory, because they are objects of focalisation as well as focalisers; Emma Sands in *An Unofficial Rose* is memorable, with her clever face, her voluminous skirts, and her cigarettes. They are not always major characters, either. Often they are economically sketched, like Miss Handforth, Demoyte's housekeeper in *The Sandcastle.* Wood writes that her novels 'are full of characters who are clearly not their author, but who often seem savagely meaningless in any way other than in their histrionic freedom' ('Iris Murdoch' 183). A.N. Wilson sees 'her fictions as an endless series of make-believes, of Iris imagining herself in different roles like the only child with a crowd of imaginary friends' (80), while Harold Bloom observes that

> of all her talents, the gift of plotting is the most formidable. … that is how Murdoch tends to manifest her considerable exuberance as a writer, rather than in the creation of endless otherness in her characters, which nevertheless (and rather sadly) seems to constitute her largest ambition. (1-2)

Her success in creating characters is qualified, but nevertheless, as Schneiderman says, 'in her many novels, Murdoch gives testimony to the wide range of her empathetic capacity, made possible by her moral intensity and her ability to imagine lives very different to her own' (392). It may be that

Murdoch's reiteration of this as her most important aim has made readers over-critical in this regard: the chief problem is not that characters are indistinguishable in looks or personality, but that emotional preoccupations and intellectual obsessions carry over from one novel to the next, embodied in different people in different, but often similarly bizarre, situations. Patricia Waugh quotes Murdoch's discussion of *Under the Net* in her interview with Kermode: 'The problem which is mentioned in the title is the problem of how far conceptualizing and theorizing, which from one point of view are absolute, essential, in fact divide you from the thing that is the object of theoretical attention' (65); and goes on to say, 'However, her obsessive concern with the self-conscious presentation of this dilemma in her fiction often precludes the possibility of developing the "opaque" or "contingent" characters which she desires' (81). She herself acknowledged that 'in order to tell the truth, especially about anything complicated, we need a conceptual apparatus which partly has the effect of concealing what it attempts to reveal' ('Existentialists and Mystics' 221).

Her other criteria for good novels are perhaps easier to measure against her work. Comic they certainly are. Awful things happen, but they are most often absurdly awful, surrounded with irrelevancies and distractions, rather than the stark and beautiful terror of tragedy. Life goes on for the survivors, the dead are left behind and superseded by other loves, other obsessions. Even Bradley Pearson's death, which could almost aspire to tragedy, is cushioned with the postscripts of other characters who comically demonstrate their continued vitality. She also resists the satirical urge: it is difficult to think of a passage in any of the novels which could be described as genuinely satirical,

although there are some which she could have steered that way if she were so inclined: Rupert's philosophical explanation of why stealing is wrong in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, perhaps, or Blaise's professional psychological activities in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine.* Perhaps the closest approach to satire comes in ironic touches in her first-person narratives, for example, when Bradley describes a childhood experience of beauty: 'the child wept and knew himself an artist' (87); but satire is a mode of writing which refuses to countenance explanation and understanding and stands apart from and above its subject matter, and its particular hard brilliance is not Murdoch's style at all.

Another of her criteria is the all-important distinction between imagination and fantasy: imagination being an impersonal force, and fantasy mere wish-fulfillment on the artist's part. Schneiderman points out that 'we know so little about her private life, that it is difficult to estimate the extent to which she has been able to compose her novels without drawing upon her deepest personal concerns' (391-2). In what she regards as imaginative, truthful writing, 'poetic justice' must be resisted. Tallis must sustain his fairly honourable defeat, but go on trying, while Julius enjoys himself unpunished, because that is the way of the world. This does not mean 'happy endings' are disallowed. As Joyce Carol Oates remarked, in a perceptive essay written in 1978, some of Murdoch's characters 'realize that they are doomed to happiness and to the mediocrity that seems to imply' ('Sacred' 3). Happy endings occur, but they are never unqualified. Tim and Gertrude reunite in *Nuns and Soldiers*, but the Count remains alone as a result; Simon and Axel re-establish their happiness in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, but in the shadow of Rupert's absurd

and horrible death. The characters who end up happily are not always the 'best' or most deserving, or the most identifiable with Murdoch and her ideas.

Her novels, she would like to think, dissipate drama and allow ordinary life to leak in: the comic and absurd play their part in this dissipation. But many of her novels contain highly dramatic situations; and they tend to be the memorable parts, rather than the philosophical conversations or reflective musings of her characters, or, in many cases, the individual characters themselves: as Bloom points out, plotting is her greatest talent. One way drama can be resisted effectively is at the close of a novel, and this is perhaps where she is most successful in this regard. The end of *The Sea, The Sea*, after all the drama, shows Charles, the protagonist, drifting back to his old ways. Mor, at the end of *The Sandcastle*, wanders, resigned and undramatic, back into his family circle and picks up the threads. Drama is not interested in the accommodations made by the survivors of catastrophe, whereas Murdoch's novels make a point of noticing them.

Murdoch is an authoritarian novelist in the sense that she does not want her novels to be factually indeterminate. A careful reader, she believes (or hopes), can always establish what 'really' happens in her novels. It is clear, however, from her interviews that this is not always the case. She has had to explain that Bradley did not kill Arnold in *The Black Prince* (Todd 103), that Anne in *Nuns and Soldiers* really may have been visited by Jesus (Heusel 11), and that James in *The Sea, The Sea* did save Charles' life by some super-human feat accomplished through his Buddhist training (Bigsby 213). Most of her novels, though, do leave one in little doubt as to the events, natural and supernatural. The deeper meanings and myths are naturally not so obvious, but

she has said several times that she is not concerned if readers fail to notice them. The novels she feels are better, her later novels, as she says, are longer and have room for descriptions of all kinds; the elliptical statement and the pregnant silence are not her style. The later novels are not in fact uniformly better than the earlier ones. It could be argued, for example, that Ludens' quest for the truth he believes Marcus possesses in *The Message to the Planet* is merely an unwieldy and overblown reiteration of Jake's pursuit of Hugo Belfounder in *Under the Net*. Her belief in the superiority of the later novels is a symptom of her central problem: that she regards her great dramatic gift as, in a way, a drawback, which impedes her in the impossible aim of creating the perfect open novel. Because she was continually worrying at the problem of writing the novels she believed she should aspire to, she failed to develop in the way she might have had she accepted her considerable novelistic gifts for what they were. Patrick Swinden analyses her problem thus: some of her characters have learned to accept their situation, like Tallis, and

> in a world where most people are for ever exercising their claim to be free, such behaviour is … bound to seem eccentric. The form of Iris Murdoch's plots, and the positions occupied in them by these natural and eccentric characters, reveals the ambiguous position she finds herself in vis-à-vis the worlds of nature and of freedom. Intellectually, she escapes the trap this modern dilemma sets for her. But her very intellectuality narrows the scope of her work to an enrichment of the concepts by which we grow to understand reality. (257)

Her plots, meanwhile, become increasingly tailored to demonstrate these concepts, rather than to portray realistic situations, and are driven by a similar set of compulsions embodied in her various major characters, with the ironic consequence that her strivings for realism are undermined by the very techniques she has developed to attain it. The fact remains that, though her plots may be 'silly [and] inconsequential', in the words of Joyce Carol Oates,

they are nevertheless 'deeply absorbing' (Oates 5): her attempts to suppress her plotting skill never entirely succeeded.

She told Michael Bellamy that there was social criticism in the novels, 'in a quiet way' (Bellamy 133). And it certainly is quiet. It is difficult to think of an example of what would ordinarily be called social criticism, in the same way, and for similar reasons, as it is difficult to identify any satire in the novels. D.W. Harding said, talking about Jane Austen, '*Not* to be preoccupied with abstract social questions is almost a necessary condition of writing a good novel' (Harding 65). Murdoch is sometimes too preoccupied with abstract *moral* questions, but although social reality constantly obtrudes in her characters' lives, it most often comes in the form of necessary personal responsibilities, like Mor's duty to his children, or Bradley's duty to Priscilla. The belittling and destructive power of gossip is sometimes mentioned, but more as an example of human nature than as social criticism. Individual responsibility is too important to Murdoch for her to be a social critic.

Individual responsibility is connected with individual difference. One of her most striking techniques for conveying her moral position that individual people have value and are profoundly different is to show how often people's opinions and feelings are very different to what other characters believe, or assume, they are, even when there is no intention to deceive. Sometimes very close siblings, or lovers, or happily married couples are able to read each other's thoughts, but more often assumptions are inaccurate, often with desperate consequences – for Hartley in *The Sea, The Sea*, for example, whom Charles disastrously misunderstands. Schneiderman says 'her favorite strategy is to reveal, at the end of a novel, how the protagonists' perceptions of various

relationships were entirely mistaken' (380). Her detailed descriptions and sometimes almost Homeric repetition of epithets are also a part of a moral imperative to particularise. Felix's car, in *An Unofficial Rose*, is always described as the 'very dark blue Mercedes', Julian's hair in *The Black Prince* is described carefully every time she appears – in fact, an interesting study could be made of hair in Murdoch's novels: so much attention is paid to it that one could conclude that it must have some coded meaning. Very few of her male characters are bald, for instance. However, coded meanings can always be constructed by an ingenious critic, when the author's intention may have been only to describe each character and situation in all its particularity. Murdoch certainly uses symbolism. A painting, or a place, or rocks or flowers, can all carry symbolic weight. Usually, as she said, it is 'invented by the characters themselves' (Biles 125), and in these cases it is quite natural. It is a human tendency, similar to the narrative impulse, to invest inanimate objects with human meaning. Many of Murdoch's novels have a natural or prehistoric phenomenon – a secluded pool, or an ancient rock carving – which the characters experience as magical in some way. These symbolic patterns can add to the repetitious effect from novel to novel, and occasionally seem perfunctory, but the symbolism she uses in her best novels is well integrated and adds resonance and texture to the narrative.

Murdoch's distinction 'between a sort of closed novel, where my own obsessional feeling about the novel is very strong and draws it closely together, and an open novel, where there are more accidental and separate and free characters' (Rose 66), is an ethical concept, part of her philosophy of the novel. In practice, she seems to believe that the distinction comes down to how self-

contained the novel's world is – whether there are many peripheral characters or not. In the Rose interview, she said she would like to write 'a novel which was made up entirely of peripheral characters' (66). Presumably this was not an entirely serious idea; she is a novelist who likes to be read! Some of her best novels, such as *An Accidental Man* or *Nuns and Soldiers*, have a lot of characters, others, like *A Severed Head* or *The Black Prince*, have a Murdochian 'court'. Over the course of her career, the irrepressible vitality which characterises many of the earlier novels gradually becomes encumbered with superfluous characters who exist merely as examples of literary freedom. In *The Sea, The Sea*, for example, Joyce Carol Oates complains, 'there are too many sketchy characters' (7). Murdoch acknowledged this problem in her interview with Frank Kermode in 1963; 'there is a tendency to oscillate between achieving a kind of intensity through having a very powerful story and sacrificing character, and having the characters and losing the intensity' ('House' 64). But the 'space in which to develop' (Todd 101) that she tries to give her characters in the later novels is occupied by more and more detailed description of their mental and emotional processes which actually inhibits their development, because they become over-determined and the reader is not allowed enough space to imaginatively recreate them. More indeterminacy would allow for greater realism.

Murdoch told Rose in 1968 that freedom was no longer her main subject, although it might have been in the past. Later novels nevertheless treat the subject. Morgan, in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, who aspires to be free, cannot achieve freedom because she is incorrigibly selfish; but nobody could describe her selfless husband Tallis as free except in the most abstract

metaphysical sense. Ann, in *An Unofficial Rose*, a good, unselfish person, is psychologically not free to marry Felix because of her bond with Randall. Freedom, for Murdoch, comes to be almost a meaningless concept. A character who claims to be free, or wishes for freedom, is almost guaranteed to be in the grip of some undeniable necessity.

Murdoch sees that the novelist is often in the false position of being a judge but trying to discourage others from judging. Her judgmental characters are usually shown to be wrong in their judgments, and she is, as she told Hartill, more interested in truth than justice. Her attention to particulars is important here, and her reluctance to satirise. Satirists are judges, who refuse to understand or to take mitigating circumstances into account. She would prefer to mention, for example, that Julius spent the war in Belsen, than merely to condemn his bad behaviour with no explanation. Murdoch tries to make each character realistic, with a unique inner life: she has criticised herself for making Nan in *The Sandcastle* and Morgan in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* too unpleasant and shallow, because this makes it too easy for the reader to condemn them. Schneiderman comes near to defining an ethical problem when he says, 'Murdoch attempts to use her imagination to trace the consequences of her protagonists' need-determined fantasies' (380). She believes that only a very small number of people are good enough to rise above their fantasies: 'It is extremely difficult, there aren't any saintly people' (220), she told Bigsby. Therefore, either she believes herself doomed to failure, or she regards herself as one of these saintly people, which does not accord with her habitual modesty – in fact, she wrote in 'The Sovereignty of Good' that 'the good man is humble' (385). James Wood has found that her

> aesthetics have a strange, quasi-philosophical circularity. … She *knows* that Shakespeare is great, philosophically. In other words, her aesthetics is not aesthetics at all, but is philosophy. … In one rather austere sense, her own novels must then seem irrelevant as practice, for they are just shards of this ideal. For if one just knows Shakespeare to be great, then one also knows that, out of sight, there is an even greater artist, the Idea of the artist. In this view of things, one could not only never be as great as Shakespeare or Tolstoy, one could never be as great as fiction itself; one could never be as great as the Good. *Thus one could never be great at all*. ('Iris Murdoch' 179-80)

He goes on to ask 'why should it be the case that the highest ethics is the suppression of self, or that the greatest artists gloriously smother their personalities?' (182). She set herself the most exalted standard, realising that she might never attain it, but she believed the effort was an artistic and moral imperative.

And it is partly this constant, if vain, effort to make her characters unique, to show that everyone has their own inner life and everyone can suffer, that there is no-one that doesn't matter, that makes her such a compelling writer. When her characters betray each other, someone gets hurt. No-one can indulge selfish urges and get away with it: there is always a price to pay. Her novels do not imply that adultery or lying are absolutely wrong, but they have consequences, some more predictable than others, which must be dealt with. She told Jo Brans, 'I think some people … might read my books because there is a kind of assertion of old-fashioned values, of the reality of virtue. Of course this also annoys other people who regard it as something not proper to be said' (44). Her values may be old-fashioned, but they are also quite austere, and if there were no escape from the machine of compulsive behaviour and habitual wrong-doing her world would be bleak indeed. Even her good characters can be, like Anne Cavidge in *Nuns and Soldiers*, 'too high-mindedly concerned with organizing the defeat of [her own] hopes to have any thought to spare for

catastrophes which her selfless masochistic morality might be bringing about' (502). Very often, too, the qualities she praises – imaginative attention to others, apprehending their individuality and difference – can lead to situations like falling in love disastrously. A person with little imagination, like James Tayper Pace in *The Bell*, is less likely to be tempted. She does, however, let some of her characters off, even if that means the consequences fall more heavily on others, like the two children in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine* who suffer while Blaise lives happily with Emily. Life is not fair, but some can salvage happiness, and are not condemned for doing so.

As a realist, which is her highest aim, she is only partly successful. Her novels delight in extreme and dramatic situations. However, even realistic art must be selective, and her plots usually concern those short periods of high, unsustainable drama and stress in people's lives which can be seen as their defining moments. Kermode observes that love and death are her constant themes, and 'the reality in which they deal is a different reality from the order of ordinary poetry … The contingent must be got in. … This reality is a difficult vocation' ('*Bruno's Dream*' 25). Strange things do happen, people are odder than they appear to be, and to show this is a part of her moral intention, but, as A.N. Wilson observes, 'the dramas of the books … take place inside the author's head, rather than in some attempted photographic representation of the real world' (80). The characters are odd, but they are odd in a very characteristic, and eventually monotonous, way.

Are her characters 'free' in her sense? L.R. Leavis quotes her own criticism of Nan in *The Sandcastle* explaining how she feels she could have improved the novel (see Bigsby 227), and goes on to criticise her for

> her mentality as a writer: her characters perform roles according to a preconceived pattern, a pattern without artistic inevitability which can be reprogrammed to come out differently. Characters are for her vehicles for concepts, which can without compunction be shuffled around. ('Anti-Artist' 142)

This is unfair, but contains a grain of truth. It is not that she sees characters as 'vehicles for concepts', although her plots may be seen in this way; it is more that she wants to be just and truthful, and not allow fantasy to skew the picture; and 'the intellect comes in … to prevent … the plot from being coerced by unconscious forces' (Bigsby, 'Interview' 227). A difficulty arises unless one sees this question of the freedom of fictional characters as a continuum. If characters are either free or unfree, perhaps none would pass the test; but if some characters are more free than others then we can see the measure of her success with characters like Bradley and Julian in *The Black Prince*, Tim and Daisy in *Nuns and Soldiers*, even Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, who is, despite his mythological origins, quite an extraordinary individual. None of these people seem like Murdoch in any significant way, and neither are they like each other. It must be, in the end, a matter of balance, a balance which at her best she achieves, but which is compromised when, in her quest for an all-inclusive realism, she tries too hard to fill in all the details.

Warner Berthoff believes that Murdoch, together with Muriel Spark, are 'very nearly the first serious English novelists who have not only broken with the exalted ethos of modernism, the supreme commitment to "writing well" and producing masterpieces, but are no longer haunted by it' (329). But Murdoch had another 'exalted ethos' which did haunt her. As James Wood puts it, 'perhaps some such excessive Platonic scrupulosity on Murdoch's part infects her practice as a novelist; it may explain the apparent wildness, even the

carelessness, of many of her novels, not to mention the almost disrespectful fecundity of her imagination' ('Iris Murdoch' 180). Bloom regarded her as the most eminent contemporary British novelist, while predicting that 'her formidable combination of intellectual drive and storytelling exuberance may never fuse into a great novel' (7). And Frank Kermode sums up his article on *Bruno's Dream* by saying that it is 'disappointing only by the fantastically high standards it contrives to suggest' (25). The duty of the artist 'to silence and expel self, to contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye, is not easy and demands a moral discipline' ('On "God" and "Good"' 352). The intentional fallacy alerts us against judging an artist by her own standards. If Murdoch longed to be a great realist and creator of characters, like Jane Austen and Tolstoy, but was rather a marvellous creator of plots, we should appreciate what she has actually done rather than complain that she has not succeeded in her own impossible, quixotic aims, at the same time acknowledging, and perhaps regretting, the extra handicap she placed herself under by her dedication to her high ideals.

Chapter Eight

Doris Lessing: Introduction

Doris Lessing has often said that she regards her lack of formal education as an advantage, and deplores what she sees as the damage done to children's imagination and love of literature by current educational practices. In an interview in 1964 she claimed that 'one of the advantages of not being educated was that I didn't have to waste time on the second-rate' and was able to read 'the classics of European and American literature'. She does concede that 'there are huge gaps in my education, but I'm nonetheless grateful that it went as it did' (Newquist 5). She believes that to encourage an interest in literature, young people 'should be taught in such a way … where they're encouraged to flit their way from flower to flower … and not be made to write detailed essays about something, because it puts them off' (Ingersoll 238). She admits that 'having their writing taught is the price writers have to pay so that academics will help to keep it alive', but dislikes 'all this nitpicking' (Ingersoll 238). This distrust of the academy is certainly connected with her unwillingness to be categorised, but could also arise from an insecure suspicion that her ideas might not stand up under close scrutiny. She denies being a didactic writer, and claims that 'to tell stories, to read them, to create them, that operates in a completely different mode … . Not intellectually, not ideologically' (Montremy 196);

> I am not seeking to influence the reader, to make him think such-and-such a thing as I do. I would simply like to be able to tell myself that I aroused the reader's curiosity, that I made the reader more attentive, more alert intellectually, and that following the little therapeutic jolt that reading represents, he asks questions, regardless of what they are. (Rousseau 154)

Her novels, essays and interviews are, however, full of moral judgements and rhetoric, and some of her opinions are illogical and contradictory. A more conventional education may, rather than having ruined her imagination and closed her mind to benign influences, have developed her critical faculty and encouraged her to examine her beliefs and prejudices more coolly before broadcasting them to a readership of 'devoted fans' who despite her protests, think of her as 'a teacher' (Lessing, 'Author Chat' 5).

Writing, for Lessing, is a vocation, a compulsion, a matter of temperament. She believes 'that children who have had to struggle psychologically have a tendency to be good writers'. She says that

> as far back as I can remember, I observed, I was aware of what was going on around me, and what was not being said. … Something must have happened to me very early, something which I don't remember and which determined this temperament, this vocation of the observer on the lookout, this vocation of writer. (Rousseau 153)

She told Thomas Frick, 'I became a writer because of frustration, the way I think many writers do' (158). Rather more mundanely, she answered the question 'What motivates you to write?' by saying, 'What motivates me to keep on writing is that I have earned my living from it for the last forty years. I am a work animal' (Tan Gim Ean et al. 200); and she told Ingersoll in 1993, 'I have to write: it's a neurosis. … I get out of balance … if I don't write' (240). She tends not to dwell on the question, answering fairly briefly when asked, but she insists that writing comes from a quest to understand, not an impulse to teach.

The creative process is mysterious to her: 'there's a sense … in which one is surprised by what comes out. You can set a thing up as much as you like, but it's different when you do it' (Gray 115). She talks of 'working on a

certain book in my head and I'm watching very wryly how this raw thing is going to take shape. There's nothing to be done about it' (Thomson 190). On a more optimistic note, however, she believes that 'a lot of writers, when they write, are much cleverer than when they are not writing, because I do think you tune into ideas, or sensations of some kind' (Forde 217). The detachment, the feeling of one part of the mind watching another, is nevertheless still present: 'If you take certain stories … and visualize what the stories say, and watch what your mind does, you learn a very great deal about yourself' (Forde 217). In this way she discovered 'a pattern of disaster' (218) in her mind that she thinks arises from the second world war, and that characterises her writing. Her characters sometimes come from life, but others, 'well, I don't know where they come from. They just spring from my own consciousness, perhaps the subconscious, and I'm surprised as they emerge' (Newquist 4-5). The act of writing is for her not difficult; she admits to being 'too prolific' (Howe 434); but asked about the diversity of her writing career, and her constant experiments with different forms and genres, she laughingly replied that she has been 'obsessed, all the time, with ordering reality' ('It Wasn't Quite So Simple').

Her struggle to deal with her readers' interpretations of her work is well illustrated by the case of *The Golden Notebook.* She was so concerned with what she regarded as misinterpretations of this novel, published in 1962, that she gave an interview to Florence Howe in 1966 specifically 'because she wanted to say things about *The Golden Notebook* to American readers' (419); she wrote a new Preface to the novel for the 1971 edition, explaining her intentions and deploring the inferences of her readers; and even in 1981, she

was still distressed by the fact that 'hardly any of my readers has seemed prepared to see the book as a whole' (Schwarzkopf 102). Eleven years later, she has finally accepted that her 'intellectual statement' in the novel was so overwhelmed by the 'blast of energy' in which it was written that 'something else came across, and that is what affects people. So I don't get cross at all now' (Forde 216). Nevertheless, since the publication of *The Fifth Child* in 1988, she has often expressed a pained surprise at the variety of interpretations it has generated. 'I don't know any writer who isn't continually astonished at what we're supposed to be up to,' she told Thomson (191). Leaving the question of odd allegorical interpretations aside, though, she has insisted to a number of interviewers that Ben is not evil, 'merely someone who's in the wrong place' (Ingersoll 235). She tries to console herself for her anxiety at 'how far apart the intention of the author and the comprehension of the reader can be' with the thought 'that a book is a living thing which can bear many kinds of fruit' (Schwarzkopf 103), but the frequency with which the subject arises in interviews, and her propensity to write forewords, prefaces, author's notes and afterwords to her fiction demonstrates that she has not entirely rid herself of this concern. As she told Bigsby, 'if you write a book which you don't see as moral believe me your readers do, and that's something that I can't ever quite come to terms with' ('Need' 72).

Her perfect reader would 'look at what a writer has to offer and take what is offered – not complain that he's not doing something else' (Ingersoll 232). Depending on what she is writing, she is more or less conscious of her audience: 'if you write a book like *African Laughter*, you have to be aware. If you write a book like *The Four-Gated City*, you don't think about what's out

there, because it spoils what you're inventing' (240). Asked what advice she had for young writers, she replied, 'You have to create those readers who want to read you. How? The only way is to write absolutely honestly about your own experiences and not think about it' (Tan Gim Ean et al. 203). Writing some of her work, however, she has deliberately tried 'to reach the youth' (Raskin 13), and has found that they are more open to her non-realistic stories, especially the space fiction (see Gray 118). In general, she believes that as a reader 'you should not bring your own agendas to a book. You should not be looking for your political messages, your own ideas. On the contrary, you should be rather passive. You should allow no barrier between yourself and what the author is saying' (Kurzweil, 'Evening' 16).

Her idea of what makes a good novel is rather harder to establish, because it is not a question in which she is particularly interested. She told Dean, 'I don't believe all that much in perfect novels. What's marvelous about novels is that they can be anything you like. That is the strength of the novel. There are no rules' (90-1); and 'there is a place for novels that have ideas and shake people up and then die' (93). She is impatient with 'these forms that we set up for ourselves', but recognises that the novel has to leave much of reality out, and this was the impetus for *The Golden Notebook*: 'Every writer's tormented by this kind of thing because we know that as soon as you start framing a novel, then things get left out' (Gray 115). This despair fed into the form of the novel:

> You see, actually that [the 'Free Women' section] is an absolutely whole conventional novel and the rest of the book is the material that went into making it. … One of the things I was saying was, well, look, this is a conventional novel … . There it is, 120,000 words; it's got a nice shape and the reviewers will say this and that. And the bloody complexity that went into it and it's always a lie. And the terrible

> despair. So you've written a good novel or a moderate novel, but what does it actually say about what you've actually experienced. That truth is, absolutely nothing. (Howe 428)

She herself, nevertheless, reads 'a lot of novels with the aim of informing myself' because 'regardless of its possible literary qualities, a novel supplies us with a fund of information' (Rousseau 150). She tends to describe rather than prescribe: she is much more likely to use the phrase 'a novel is …' than the phrase 'a novel should'; for instance, she told Montremy,

> the novel is whatever each author makes of it. There are no 'tricks'. It simply exists – tries to exist in what is being written. That could take the form of a vast architecturally complex composition or a simple linear novel in accordance with whatever is happening at the moment in which it's being written; (196)

and in the *New Straits Times* discussion, she said, 'I enjoy reading and it continues to be a great adventure. A novel is so unpredictable; it comes up with so much' (Tan Gim Ean et al. 202). But finally in 1992 she was drawn to say, 'I do think a novel should have that quality that good novels do have that makes you think about life. Forgive me for the cliches, but it should enlarge your mind and not narrow it' (Upchurch 222).

As for the broader picture, 'one begins with the idea of transforming society … through literature and then, when nothing happens, one feels a sense of failure' (Oates, 'One Keeps Going' 38). At first, she says, she 'firmly believed' that being a writer meant 'changing the world. I saw it as my duty to be politically active, to take the field against injustice, and wherever I went, standing or sitting, to discuss political subjects'. However, she later realised that

> the writer is nothing but an isolated voice in the wilderness. Many hear it; most pass by. It has taken a long time for me to recognize that in their books writers should distance themselves from the political questions of the day. They only waste their energy senselessly and bar

> their vision from the universal themes of humanity which know neither time nor space. … All ideologies are deceptive and serve only a few, not people in general. (Schwarzkopf 105)

With *The Golden Notebook*, she says, she 'wanted to tell a story which neither political positions nor sociological analyses were capable of exhausting', not a 'treatise on feminine stereotypes of the '60s' (Montremy 193). She is impatient of the fact that 'all writers get asked by interviewers this question: "Do you think a writer should … ?" The question always has to do with a political stance. Note that the assumption behind the words is that all writers should do the same thing' (Kurzweil, 'Unexamined' 205). In response to one critic, who called 'her ventures from realism into science fiction … "a plain evasion of her duty"', she 'belligerently defends her right to do whatever she likes: "There is no such thing as duty. You write something and people either like it or they don't"' (Bertodano). To close her interview with Josephine Hendin in 1972, she quoted Tolstoy: '"the function of art is to make that understood which in the form of argument would be incomprehensible", … and that is what I feel about writing' (56).

In order to convey her ideas, she has sometimes found it necessary to adapt her style. She is uneasy about language:

> Words are contaminated, full of traditional associations, above all in psychology, in religion, in the interior world … Hence, I find myself forced to write by analogy, in order to avoid the mundane. *Memoirs of a Survivor* is the direct result of my meditating about the inadequacy of language. I write as in legends or in fairy tales, by means of metaphors and analogies. (Torrents 66-7)

Talking to C.J. Driver in 1978, she gave several reasons for what he calls the 'deliberate clumsiness' of her style:

> First, she used the image of digging with a small spade in a huge pile of sand; if she were to take sides in the life/art debate, she would obviously take the side of life: that is, she always tries to validate her

> vision of things by referring to the contingent world, even when her work is at its most visionary. … She is more concerned with the validity her vision of life gives her work than with any kind of inner artistic consistency. …
>
> Then, when she started writing, she had had very little formal education … 'A lot of the bad grammar, the strange punctuation, the clumsiness of my first things was simply a function of my lack of education'. …
>
> Thirdly, her method of work contributes. She spends a great deal of time thinking about her work before she writes anything; then she does a rough sketch very fast indeed; then she re-writes the sketch at great length, though still obviously working at a pace that would alarm most writers; then she cuts a great deal; and then 'I don't *polish* it – that would be entirely the wrong word, because in a way I roughen it; I try to get it simple, clear, which for me is the same as getting it right'. (19-20)

She agreed when Driver also suggested to her, inter alia, that 'the apparent clumsiness is often the clumsiness of a character's desire to express to herself, or himself, exactly what she, or he, is perceiving, thinking, feeling' (20). Many of her sentences end with '… what?' The questioning, the groping for the correct word, thus becomes part of her prose style. She believes that all her books 'indicate, sometimes in spite of myself, the existence in us of an inexpressible dimension stronger than the theories through which we may attempt to channel it' (Montremy 198). Her most important technique for expressing the inexpressible is to attempt to interrogate not only facts and phenomena but language itself to achieve her ultimate aim, 'a truthful book' (Tan Gim Ean et al. 203), even though

> I am forced to recognize again and again how fast language encounters boundaries. How, for example, can deep perceptions be clothed convincingly in words? That's where language begins to limp deplorably and realizing this, I plunge sometimes into a creative crisis. (Schwarzkopf 106)

She is not at all reluctant to use symbolism, and 'treasure[s] parables, metaphors, fables, and allegories … literary forms that are simple yet excellent in suiting my purposes of explaining the most profound spiritual phenomena'

(Schwarzkopf 106). She feels no compulsion to be original in her symbolism: all the Jungian archetypes which appear in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, for example, are intentionally familiar, if not hackneyed. She said to Bikman,

> Now you can go through a writer's work and say, 'Writer X is fascinated by the symbol' – I don't know, a rose or a seagull. But what is interesting is not that there should be a rose or a seagull or a teacup or whatever, but what use is made of it, how it develops. Because it can be a metaphor in one book and it can be something quite specific in another. (61)

Symbolism, then, can help when language becomes a barrier, as it were helping the writer to bypass the reader's intellect and reach the unconscious mind.

Freedom is a difficult concept for Lessing. She ironically entitled her novel within *The Golden Notebook* 'Free Women', and demonstrated how Anna and Molly, although in one sense free of normal conventions like marriage, are absolutely bound by their connections with others, especially their lovers and their children:

> I was simply trying to understand what was happening to us, to all of us, who refused to live according to 'conventional morality'. And who all encountered, nevertheless, many difficulties, submissive to the point of absurdity in our need to proclaim our freedom. (Montremy 198)

'We want it all to be simple, on a platter,' she said to Torrents in 1980, '… but we have forgotten that no one owes us anything and that pain and sacrifice are necessary to find the right path, for moral equilibrium' (69). She argues with Bigsby about the determinism he sees in her work:

> While there is something in me which I recognize is uniquely me, and which obviously interests me more than other things and which I am responsible for, at the same time I have a view of myself in history, as something which has been created by the past and conditioned by the present. ('Need' 76)

Freedom is constrained but still real:

> I think that the patterns of people's lives are determined by their society and by their characters and upbringing, of course. But what I'm

> interested in in people is not what makes them like everybody *else*, and what you can expect because they had this and that upbringing, but something else that can fight them out of it or make them different. (Bertelsen 132)

She denies that she intentionally expresses a fatalistic view that 'there is no point in playing a role in the social world or indeed in attempting to intervene in history at all', or that, in her space fiction, 'individuals seem to be admired to the extent that they realize that their chief function is to submerge themselves in a generality' (Bigsby, 'Need' 75). Also, she says that 'despite a certain spiritual and moral superiority over the Earthlings, my denizens of distant galaxies are finally equal to us human beings again' (Schwarzkopf 107). She did admit to Michael Dean, however, that she had always felt herself 'sitting in judgment of [her] civilization … and perhaps it's not much use' (87). She can feel strongly about issues, but is more interested in understanding than judging:

> When I am passionately angry about something, I think that something is terribly wrong and something else is terribly right, and I identify with the right and I can hate the wrong. This produces this pure flame of energy. But it's extremely suspect, and I try to suppress it, because life isn't like that, not at all. (Bertelsen 142)

Considering specific issues in isolation, such as European colonisation of Africa, takes too narrow a view to be just: 'If you're going to say in Southern Africa that the problem is that the whites want to enslave the blacks and that's the end of it, you're overlooking a great deal else', such as that the black regime in Nigeria was corrupt and 'not a paradise', and that 'India is as full of … color prejudice as anywhere' (Bertelsen 125).

There is a tension, in much of Lessing's writing, between the simple black and white picture, the 'pure flame of energy' of fanaticism and righteousness, and the knowledge that 'life is not like that, not at all'. This

tension is possibly the most interesting thing about Lessing as a writer. She has been attracted in her lifetime to the party line, the belief in a utopia just around the corner, but as she says, 'I never wished to offer a program of ideas or behavior guides. If I had been in possession of such programs I certainly never would have written' (Montremy 193). Her being a writer made her finally unable to sustain her communist beliefs: a writer like Lessing cannot fail to be aware that life is not simple enough to be explained by the economic view of man: 'When I was in the Communist Party years ago, everything was pushing me toward what was called "the great problems of the hour". But I sensed that in my books it was also a matter of another thing, a phenomenon deeper and more mysterious' (Montremy 197). But her attraction to communism is as much a part of her essential nature as her urge to write; and her urge to explain 'simply' what she was trying to do in novels like *The Golden Notebook* and *The Fifth Child* similarly comes into conflict with her desire to let her readers be stimulated by her work and make up their own minds. She is an inveterate rhetorician who despises rhetoric.

In the following chapters I look at some of these contradictions as they affect her fictional writing. The first chapter concentrates on an early story set in Africa. In the long story 'Hunger', Lessing was explicitly attempting a simple morality tale about right and wrong, and she believes it was a failure. I examine to what extent it succeeds and fails, on her own terms, and also in a broader 'post-colonial' context. The second chapter looks at conflicting ideas of the individual and universality of experience in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, a novel which Lessing described as 'an attempt at autobiography'. Thirdly, I look at the extremes of distance in her novels of the 1970s and 1980s; the

Canopus in Argos series on the one hand, and *The Diaries of Jane Somers* on the other. The questions of determinism and individuals' control over and responsibility for their own actions are important in these novels, and the vast range of different points of view they dramatise makes an interesting case study in this fruitful area of creative tension.

Chapter Nine

Doris Lessing's 'Settler's Problem': The Ethics of Representation in 'Hunger'.

Doris Lessing's background as a child of English settlers in Southern Rhodesia gives her critics a whole line of attack which seems to have no relevance for a more 'central' English author like Iris Murdoch. Africa is (or was at the beginning of her writing career) a vital source of her inspiration as a writer – what she called in the Preface to her second volume of African Stories the 'landscape which is always there' (*Sun* 11), but her stories of the settler life she knew have drawn the attention of post-colonial critics. Anthony Beck, for example, in his article 'Doris Lessing and the Colonial Experience', writes that 'there is little in the way of overtly hostile judgements made by the author about her characters, only a wry, detached observation which adds up to very little by way of the condemnation of white racialism', and that 'there is noticeably little sign of any radical alienation from the values and attitudes of the English colonial establishment' (66-7). Lessing might repeat to him what she said to an interviewer in 1986, 'What you want me to do is to write didactic novels' (Bertelsen 125). He seems to have missed the biting satire which is directed against the white population in stories such as 'A Home for the Highland Cattle' and 'The Black Madonna'; the latter story, Lessing writes, 'is full of the bile that is produced in me by the thought of "white" society in Southern Rhodesia as I knew and hated it' (*Sun* 11). Beck goes on, later in his essay, to say that sociological surveys conducted in the late 1950s and 1960s exhibited 'a remarkable congruence' (72) with her portrait of Southern Rhodesian society. It seems to surprise him that a perceptive writer of fiction can observe society with a truth that matches the findings of sociologists.

Lessing herself is, inevitably, quite familiar with the particular dilemmas a novelist faces when writing realistic fiction, especially when one is politically aware. In her 1957 essay 'The Small Personal Voice' she writes,

'the minimum act of humility for a writer [is] to know that one is a writer at all because one represents, makes articulate, is continuously and invisibly fed by, numbers of people who are inarticulate, to whom one belongs, to whom one is responsible' (24). However, in an interview in 1969, she says, 'I am intensely aware of, and want to write about, politics, but I often find that I am unable to embody my political vision in a novel' (Raskin 15). And by 1980, she says, 'I've lost my moral indignation completely. I certainly try to understand what is happening. That's quite different from trying to think what ought to be happening' (Bikman 59). She is talking here specifically about feminism, but for a novelist, it is clear that 'moral indignation', the 'pure flame of energy' (Bertelsen 142), sometimes needs to be suppressed in favour of an effort to 'try to understand what is happening'.

The particular problem of representation of 'the other' in a colonial context is exemplified by two African characters who appear in her early work; Moses in *The Grass is Singing* and Jabavu in the long story 'Hunger'. In the first case, the African is seen entirely from the outside. Moses is not demonised, but neither is he explained. He remains mysterious, and the action is presented almost entirely through the eyes of the white characters. Questioned about the problems created by her identification of Moses and Africans with darkness and mystery, she replied,

> You know, I'm not aware of it. There was a long time when I thought that it was a pity I ever wrote Moses like that, because he was less of a person than a symbol. But it was the only way I *could* write him at that time since I'd never *met* Africans excepting the servants or politically, in a certain complicated way. But now I've changed my mind again. I think it was the right way to write Moses, because if I'd made him too individual it would've unbalanced the book. I think I was right to make him a bit unknown. (Bertelsen 133)

Moses is almost an embodiment of indeterminacy in the novel, and if he were less of a mystery much of the narrative tension would disappear. In fact, for a short time, necessarily after the murder, he is used as a focaliser. The narrator rather uncertainly wavers between knowing his mind: 'this was his final

moment of triumph, a moment so perfect and complete that it took the urgency from thoughts of escape, leaving him indifferent' (219), and not admitting knowledge: 'what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say' (219-20). But for the most part his motivation is completely unknown, and this could leave her open to the kind of criticism Salman Rushdie makes of Paul Scott in his 1984 essay 'Outside the Whale'. He does not accept Scott's harshness 'in his portraits of many British characters' as justification for the fact that 'the [Raj] *Quartet's* form tells us, in effect, that the history of the end of the Raj was largely composed of the doings of the officer class and its wife. Indians get walk-ons, but remain, for the most part, bit-players in their own history' (113). Robin Moore objects that 'he denies that Raj history is Indian history, even though the British ruled India' (139). Fiction writers in any case must limit their scope: perhaps Rushdie would now believe more strongly in the right of authors to make their own decisions about their subject matter.

It is also tempting for some critics to see a novel like *The Grass is Singing* as a reinforcement of the myth of the threat the African poses to the safety of white settlers, especially women. Katherine Fishburn explores this possibility, but finds evidence for the fact that the myth is not attributable to the author or the narrator, but to the characters themselves, 'all of whom are convinced they are themselves (living) in a manichean[1] allegory' ('Manichean' 4). Lessing herself supports Fishburn's tentative conclusion in a 1980 interview: 'With the anonymity [of Moses] I tried to sum up how the white people would see someone like this because they wouldn't see him very much as an individual at all' (Thorpe 100). Mary Turner, however, has been forced to see Moses as an individual, and it is partly the conflict between this and her innate white settler belief in the impossibility of a personal relation between them that drives her to insanity. The 'plurality of meaning' (Fishburn,

'Manichean' 12) in the novel – a novel which some critics see as having a meaning 'so self-evident, so readily accessible, that no formal exegesis is necessary' (1) – leaves Fishburn with no firm conclusions.

In contradiction to objections such as Rushdie's that the Indians should play a larger part in novels about the Raj, there is another line of criticism which questions whether the colonisers have a right to describe the colonised at all, whether from the inside or the outside. Lorna Sage in her book *Doris Lessing* calls this question Lessing's 'settler problem':

> To explain Moses, to write him out, might well be to *white* him out, even if one did it very differently from the newspaper clipping's stereotype [in the novel] of the thieving houseboy. But then again, to leave him blank, in a book so conscious of the oppressive function of silence, is deeply embarrassing. (27-28)

On the other hand, when, in the novella 'Hunger', one of the stories in the collection *Five* published in 1953, Lessing tries the subjective approach and writes entirely from the point of view of the black characters, Sage believes that in this case 'her attempts to represent Africans directly are haunted by the sense that she is behaving, if only metaphorically, like a colonizer, inhabiting their space, claiming to speak for them' (28). This is a dilemma indeed, and one suspects that some writers might feel so constrained by it that they are prevented from expressing themselves at all, like Anna in *The Golden Notebook*, unable to write due to an overwhelming feeling that any narrative is somehow in bad faith. In an article in *Australian Book Review*, John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan wrote:

> What worries me is that the terms of discussion seem to have (as in literary theory) become instruments of restriction, whereby a writer might actually avoid grappling with issues of racism and dispossession simply because whatever s/he says is going to be 'incorrect' from someone's point of view.
>
> Isn't it just as 'imperialist' to sit back and say nothing, write nothing, as to risk falling into certain ways of seeing or not fully grasping the nature of a problem? (36)

Lessing is as conscious of these problems as anyone, but it has not discouraged her from attempting a variety of solutions, despite the objections

of some of her critics. Anthony Chennells wrote in an article on the Zimbabwean response to Lessing's African stories that 'problems of narrative' are raised by this story:

> How far are whites absent in a story where the black subjects are produced by a white writer? How far is 'Hunger' a product of white ideology even if the ideology is certainly liberal and probably socialist? Such questions, which may seem unacceptably racist in other contexts, assume a very real significance in a country where … blacks are concerned to control the literary discourse of an independent Zimbabwe. (Chennells 35)

This article is at least in part an examination of the attitude of 'cultural nationalists' in Zimbabwe, so Chennells' criticism is at one remove, but it is difficult to accept that 'unacceptable racism' should be thus transmuted merely by the concerns of later 'cultural nationalism' into a dismissal of her relevance and worth. He goes on to say, however, that if 'the sense of a Zimbabwean nation is not sufficiently strong in her work', it is not surprising, 'considering the period when she lived in this country, … for even in the early 1950s the collapse of European empires in Africa was impossible to foresee' (38-39); and that although 'Lessing's oppositions of settler capitalism and romantic anti-capitalism may no longer be relevant items in a Zimbabwean discourse … her art recognises equivalent tensions to those which are familiar today and her discourse around those tensions refuses closure' (39). It is interesting that, twenty years later, she introduced a more utopian picture of a pre-white society in Zimbabwe in her space fiction novel *Shikasta*, where she describes 'a tribe with a particularly agreeable nature, being peace-loving, good-humoured, laughter-loving, natural story-tellers, and skilled in the crafts' (199) whose land was invaded by 'sticks of people' who were 'as clumsy as if they had been cursed' (200) and who treated them 'with a coldness and a contempt which they did not understand' and suppressed rebellion 'with extremes of cruelty and ruthlessness' (201). The cultural nationalists of 1990s Zimbabwe would find little to dispute there.

Another attack on European writing about colonial societies comes from Chinua Achebe, who wrote his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in 'an attempt to give a less "superficial" picture "not only of the country – but even of the Nigerian character"' (Innes 22) than Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and similar novels. He decided that 'the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted and well-intentioned' (Innes 12). We know that Achebe read *Mister Johnson* and *Heart of Darkness* before he wrote *Things Fall Apart*, but I have not found any reference by him to Lessing's African stories. 'Hunger' was published five years before Achebe's novel, and although of course it is set in a different part of Africa, Lessing's sensitivity to the Africans' culture and knowledge of their ways seems nearer Achebe's than that of Cary or any of the other authors of 'appalling novels about Africa' (Innes 12) he deplores. Achebe's principal arguments with *Mister Johnson*, according to C.L. Innes, are concerned with the rootlessness of the African protagonist, and the portrayal of the African community and its leaders as selfish, greedy and despotic, making 'arbitrary and individualistic' decisions (24). *Things Fall Apart*, on the contrary, 'demonstrates the intricate relationship between a man's individual psychology and the social context in which he has grown up' (24). The language of the narrator is full of echoes of 'expressions and proverbs used by Okonkwo, Obierika and others ... and thus the identity of the narrator as spokesman for the Igbo community is emphasized', whereas 'Cary's narrative voice is quite distinct from the voices of any of his characters' (33). It can be noted, however, that the narrator in *Things Fall Apart* does occasionally talk confidentially over his characters' heads directly to the reader. In the following passage, the narrator is breaking a taboo of his tribe by hinting that the *egwugwu*, the nine 'great masked spirits in the clan', may not in fact be spirits at all:

> Okonkwo's wives, and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springly walk of Okonkwo.

> And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu.* (63-64)

It is in fact the unmasking of one of the *egwugwu* in the presence of the uninitiated that sets off the train of events which leads to Okonkwo's disgrace and suicide, and the narrator, here acting similarly, is very far from acting as 'a spokesman for the Igbo community'.

In 'Hunger', Lessing is no doubt aiming to 'represent' and 'make articulate' some of the 'numbers of people who are inarticulate', as she wrote in 'The Small Personal Voice'. In contrast to Cary, she shows very clearly the sense of community which is under threat from colonial exploitation. She does not depict the pre-colonial period as a golden age. Through Jabavu's mother, she criticises 'the old times' which his father longs to recapture:

> The old man is tired and speaks slowly. He has said all this very often before. His family listen and yet do not listen. What he says already exists, like words on a piece of paper, to be read or not, to be listened to or not.
>
> 'What is happening to our people?' he asks, sorrowfully. 'What is happening to our children? Once, in our kraals, there was peace, there was order. Every person knew what it was they should do and how that thing should be done. The sun rose and sank, the moon changed, the dry season came, then the rains, a man was born and lived and died. We knew, then, what was good and what was evil.'
>
> His wife, the mother, thinks: He longs so much for the old times, which he understood, that he has forgotten how one tribe harried another, he has forgotten that in this part of the country we lived in terror because of the tribes from the South. Half our lives were spent like rabbits in the kopjes, and we women used to be driven off like cattle to make wives for the men of other tribes. She says nothing of what she thinks, only: 'Yes, yes, my husband, that is very true.' (254)

There is not as much emphasis in 'Hunger' as in *Things Fall Apart* on the ritual life of the village. There is an implication that this has already been considerably undermined by contact with white civilisation, which in Achebe's novel is only beginning. The local Greek trader, for example, provides a powerful temptation for the villagers: they sell him, at his urging, the surplus produce which they would otherwise have stored for lean times, and spend the proceeds on luxuries from his shop. The story focusses on the hunger of

Jabavu, a sixteen year old village boy, for the attractions of civilisation, so there is little detailed description of the community he is rejecting. The old ideas of the village are mentioned, but ‘Jabavu does not despise these ideas: simply, they are not for him. There is no need to despise something from which one is already freed’ (244). After some experience in the city, however, as he prepares himself for a year in prison, he begins to realize the value of the ‘old ideas’ of community in the village:

> ... in the tribe and the kraal, the life of his fathers was built on the word *we*. Yet it was never for him. And between then and now has been a harsh and ugly time when there was only the word I, I, I – as cruel and sharp as a knife. The word *we* has been offered to him again, accepting all his goodness and his badness, demanding everything that he can offer. (378)

Coming at the close of the story, this rejection of individualism and affirmation of the community values represented by the political leader Mr Mizi has an affinity with Achebe’s concern to present the place, however uncomfortable, of each member of the village in his community, even though Lessing’s stated intention was primarily to present communist ideals. The characters in ‘Hunger’ who have forgotten the old ways have gone badly astray; and on the other hand Okonkwo is not totally integrated into his society any more than Jabavu is, although he deeply believes in its religion and customs. Simply, he is on the side of the older, pre-contact generation, where Jabavu is on the side of the younger. But Okonkwo, through his ambition and his desperate need to live down his father’s reputation for laziness, has his own form of individualism which leads him to various actions that contravene the traditions of the tribe, and eventually causes the rash action that ends in his death. Both Okonkwo, a middle-aged elder of his clan, and Jabavu, a youth of sixteen, are described by their narrators as child-like in their pride and ambition for individual glory.

Another criticism of *Mister Johnson* is that there is no sense of the different African languages; Johnson can communicate with any other

Africans, whereas Achebe makes it clear that difficulties in communication are common between Africans from different regions. Lessing's Jabavu has taught himself English from scraps of newspaper salvaged from the Greek store, and has had a little practice with a man from the next village, five miles away, and it is only thus that he can communicate at all with many other Africans when he reaches the town. Perhaps it is a little unrealistic that his English should be so good when it has had so little use, but at least Lessing does not ignore the question.

The language of the narrator of 'Hunger' is deliberately simple, echoing the dialogue, although there is not the use of proverbs in the narrative that is found in *Things Fall Apart*. The more traditionally-minded characters in Hunger, like Jabavu's father and brother, speak in metaphors in very much the same way as the villagers in *Things Fall Apart*. In 'Hunger', the father says, 'When I hear the tales that are brought from the white man's town my heart is dark as a valley under a raincloud' (255). Okonkwo's father says, 'Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them' (6). And there is a similar type of personification of parts of the body in the two texts: 'Jabavu says to his feet: Now walk on, walk. But his feet do not obey him' (279). Okonkwo's second wife Ekwefi says to her friend, 'I cannot yet find the mouth with which to tell the story' (34). The language of everyday is often figurative, but the metaphors are based on concrete aspects of nature and the human body rather than abstractions. The impression of simplicity in 'Hunger' is increased by the fact that the narrative voice is in the present tense throughout. Innes distinguishes the pace of *Things Fall Apart*, 'with its numerous digressions and episodic structure, reminiscent of oral composition' (33), from Cary's 'breathless pace' in *Mister Johnson*. Although the present tense is part of the technique Cary uses in *Mister Johnson* in order to carry the reader 'unreflecting on the stream of events' (Innes 17), Lessing's present tense in 'Hunger' allows pauses for contemplation. The pace

of the story is still somewhat faster and more linear than *Things Fall Apart*, which to western readers may seem padded out with unwarranted detail. In Chapter Eight, for example, there is a paragraph devoted to Okonkwo's taking snuff, ending, 'Then he remembered he had not taken out his snuff-spoon. He searched his bag again and brought out a small, flat, ivory spoon, with which he carried the brown snuff to his nostrils' (45). The western reader expects this to lead somewhere – perhaps he will find some unexpected item in his bag which will advance the story; but it has no apparent function but to describe the everyday apparatus of Okonkwo's life. In 'Hunger', there is no such 'irrelevant' description – anything like this would contribute materially either to the setting, the plot or to character delineation, and in this way the story is closer to the expectations of European readers. The main problem with the narrative style is that occasional lapses into more sophisticated language draw attention to its studied simplicity, and these uncertainties of tone can seem patronising. For example, the narrative breaks away from Jabavu's point of view in the description of a conversation he has during a meeting:

> He cannot know that this man spoke only so as to see his face clearly, for he comes to all such meetings pretending to be like the others in order to return later to the Government office which wishes to know who of the Africans are troublemakers and seditious. Before the meeting is over, Jabavu has told this friendly man his name and his village, and how much he admires the men of light, information which is very welcome. (321)

It is necessary to move to the outside view so that we can appreciate Jabavu's naïvety, but this is a little clumsy, and the use of the word 'seditious' is out of keeping with the simplicity of the narrative voice.

Perhaps only a Southern African would be qualified to judge the authenticity of Lessing's representation of their life in the villages and the cities. Chennells' article quoted above is interested only in the political aspects of her writing and does not discuss the accuracy of its factual details. However, she mentions in her autobiography that one of her African stories

was submitted by a Nigerian under his own name for a short story competition and thus ‘proved itself “politically correct” I feel (for it seems the new dogma is that whites cannot write about blacks)’ (*Under* 113). It is interesting that Lessing felt that she could not write about black Africans as individuals until she had been away from Africa for some time:

> I wrote *The Grass is Singing* in Rhodesia as a white person and my contact with blacks as equals was just non-existent. ... You couldn't have a really equal relationship with a black person. ... By the time I’d come to write ‘Hunger’ I’d lived in England for quite a long time and I’d known a great many Africans and Jamaicans, and so on, as people. I no longer thought in terms of color. (Thorpe 100-101)

She was able to learn more about African village life and life in the townships from people she met as equals in England than from her own experience in the country itself: ‘The background came from Africans I knew, who would describe, when I asked, exactly how this or that was done in a village, how things were in the locations and shebeens of Salisbury’ (*Walking* 70). In any case, ‘Hunger’, as a factual representation of black African society during colonial times, appears to compare quite well with stories by authors with more direct personal knowledge. One of Lessing’s outstanding skills as a writer (and one which she often, to the detriment of her work, feels the need to suppress) is her ability to create a world seen convincingly through the eyes of others. One of her most effective ethical techniques is one of alienation – looking at familiar things from an unfamiliar perspective; as Shklovsky wrote in his essay ‘Art as Technique’, making ‘the familiar seem strange’ – removing ‘objects from the automatism of perception’ (21). This tendency becomes more marked in her later work, notably *The Four-Gated City* and the space fiction, but even in this early work it is salutary to see the city as Jabavu sees it, and to share in his puzzlement and wonder, knowing the impossibility of someone in his position ever being able to participate in the wealth of the civilisation he covets, and which most of those who will read this story take for granted. The narrative is full of vividly imagined details, for example when

Jabavu's brother Pavu is asked to make his mark he 'is ashamed because he has never held a pencil and the paper feels light and difficult to him, and he clutches it between his fingers as if it might blow away' (268), and Jabavu is fascinated by the 'shiny metal clasp' (272) on a case belonging to the Samus when he first meets them. There is much ethical content in such a story – as Lessing said in an interview in 1983, 'Who could not write about the African coming to town, because it's such a story' (Gray 113). And as she makes clear in the Preface to the 1973 collection in which the story was reprinted, it was the ethical dimension of the story that most interested her:

> Of the five long stories, or short novels in *Five*, *Hunger* which is reprinted here is the failure and, it seems, the most liked.
>
> It came to be written like this. I was in Moscow with a delegation of writers, back in 1952. It was striking that while the members of the British team differed very much politically, we agreed with each other on certain assumptions about literature – in brief, that writing had to be a product of the individual conscience, or soul. Whereas the Russians did not agree at all – not at all. Our debates, many and long, were on this theme.
>
> ... I was thinking about what Russians were demanding in literature – greater simplicity, simple judgements of right and wrong. We, the British, had argued against it, and we felt we were *right* and the Russians *wrong*. But after all, there was Dickens, and such a short time ago, and his characters were all good or bad – unbelievably Good, monstrously Bad, but that didn't stop him from being a great writer. Well, there I was, with my years in Southern Africa behind me, a society as startlingly unjust as Dickens's England. Why, then, could I not write a story of simple good and bad, with clear-cut choices, set in Africa? The plot? Only one possible plot – that a poor black boy or girl should come from a village to the white man's rich town and ... there he would encounter, as occurs in life, good and bad, and after much trouble and many tears he would follow the path of ...
>
> I tried, but it failed. It wasn't true. (*Sun* 10-11. First ellipsis mine, others Lessing's.)

More recent concerns about the right to represent were not as prevalent when 'Hunger' was written, and as we have seen, Lessing saw it as her duty to represent the inarticulate and powerless, very much as Mulk Raj Anand must have felt when writing novels like *Coolie* and *Untouchable.* Anand is of Indian race, and it does not usually occur to critics to question his right to represent the illiterate and inarticulate, but his life, cosmopolitan and

sophisticated, was nevertheless obviously very different from those he wrote about – perhaps almost as different as Lessing's from Jabavu's.

As a story of the struggle between good and evil, how far does 'Hunger' succeed? Lorna Sage dismisses it as 'a version of urban pastoral, tinged with dubious nostalgia for the collective conscience' (Sage, *Doris Lessing* 29). This takes too simple a view of the story. The basic plot may be susceptible to this kind of analysis: Jabavu, a youth who has never left his kraal, longs for the excitement of the white man's city. He leaves his family, travels to the city, and is faced with a clear choice; to join the freedom fighters, and live a life of dedication and hardship, or to become a member of a criminal gang. He drifts into the criminal gang, partly against his will, and ends by being tried and imprisoned as a thief. In prison, he is offered another chance to be accepted as one of the freedom fighters, which we are led to believe he will take. A simple story, with heroes – Mr Mizi and the Samus in their political struggle – and villains – Jerry, the leader of the gang, and Betty, the weak, demoralised girl who falls for Jabavu and snares him for the gang. But Lessing being Lessing, she cannot help introducing shades of grey into her black and white fable. Firstly, as I show above, it is made clear that the old life of the tribe and the village was no golden age, and certainly its present is not made to seem especially wholesome; the life of the village has already degenerated to a large extent. Secondly, there is the ambiguous character of Mrs Kambusi, Betty's landlady and the operator of a shebeen, an illegal liquor house selling the potent and toxic skokian to the Africans in the township. In spite of her immoral activity, she gives Jabavu a clear warning to escape the criminal life and the charms of Betty, and to join Mr Mizi and his group. He sees her at first as 'a nice woman of the old kind, decent and respectable' (295); his new life in the city has been enough of a shock already to make him think of the old life he despised as something intrinsically good, and he is grateful to hear her

speak in his own language. It is she who first makes explicit Jabavu's choice between good and evil:

> When I heard you had fallen in with the men of light before you even entered the city, I asked myself what kind of good luck it was that you carry with you! And then I remembered that from their hands you had fallen into those which we now see lying on the table, twitching crossly because what we say is not understood. Your luck is very mixed, my friend. And yet it is very powerful, for many thousands of our people enter this city and know nothing of either the men of the light or the men of darkness … save what they hear through other mouths. But since it has fallen out that you have a choice to make, I wish to tell you, speaking now as one of your own people, … that you are a fool if you do not leave this girl and go immediately to the house whose number you know. (298)

But she is clever and shrewd, and soon regards him with contempt when he does not take her advice. She cannot be viewed as a figure of evil, even though she is not an effective power for the good. For Beck, Lessing 'expresses unmistakable scorn for moderates like Mzingeli with characters like "Mr Mizi" and "Mr Samu" with their concern to demonstrate their own spineless "respectability" to the Europeans, who despise them and harass them' (70). He is again wide of the mark: in this case he sees irony where none was intended. Mizi and Samu are rather pompous; Mr Samu has a way of talking to individuals as if he is addressing a crowded lecture hall, and 'Mr Mizi is like an old bull who is used to his power. His face is not one a young man may easily love, for there is no laughter in it, no easy warmth' (322). But there is no doubt Lessing intends them as worthy characters, whether or not she succeeds.

Lessing, in trying to write a simple morality tale, succeeds in her picture of evil as frightening and at the same time hard to resist, but as many before her and since have found, the good are especially difficult to make attractive. In making Jabavu turn once more to the traditions of community as his only

hope of salvation from the evils of civilisation, she is not only affirming an ethical system which is culturally appropriate for an African villager, but also presenting a psychologically convincing outcome. Jabavu's desire to belong once again after the horror of his short criminal career has a ring of truth, despite Lessing's own rejection of it. Her opinion that the story is a failure may not be because it is in the end too simple, but because she could not make it simple enough – in other words, the Russians were wrong.

In their *Australian Book Review* article, Kinsella and Ryan say, 'when people write about others, it's as if they're putting down on paper a kind of *dream* about others; there isn't, after all, any real accurate depiction. ... The sort of person the dream might claim to "represent" is usually indignant at it' (38). People in 'subaltern' positions, like Jabavu or his mother, or Okonkwo and his wives, or like Munoo in *Coolie*, are not able to write and publish, so someone literate needs to speak for them if their stories are to be heard. This is a paradox which has occurred to many post-colonial writers. Innes points out that 'Achebe uses the written word brought by the colonizers in order to record and recreate the oral world obliterated or denied by them' (35). But without this apparent breach of faith, how are we ever to begin to comprehend the world of 'the other'? Wolfgang Iser believes that

> literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it. … Thus it is perhaps one of the chief values of literature that by its very indeterminacy it is able to transcend the restrictions of time and written word and to give to people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enter other worlds and so enrich their own lives. ('Indeterminacy' 44-45)

Lessing's attempt to simulate the life of Jabavu may seem occasionally patronising or even ham-fisted, but, as a political piece, it was unusually sensitive and penetrating for its time and circumstances, and in aesthetic terms, it has merits of form and style which go beyond its utility.

'Hunger' is a clear example of a fiction which could be in no way construed as autobiographical, and which makes an attempt to represent the Other. In the next chapter, I will consider a novel published over twenty years later, in which Lessing draws on her own life for a more complex type of moral fable.

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[1] A 'manichean allegory' is defined by Fishburn as 'an allegory that functions … to reinscribe the power and dominance of the white colonial ruling class' (2).

Chapter Ten

An Autobiography of Everyone? Intentions and Definitions in *Memoirs of a Survivor.*

Memoirs of a Survivor was first published in 1974, and is the second of what Lessing has described as her 'unrealistic stories' (Tan Gim Ean et al. 201). The first was the even more enigmatic *Briefing for a Descent into Hell.* The 'unrealism' of this novel resides mainly in its elastic use of time, and in the ability of the narrator to enter, at certain times, another world beyond her living room wall. The 'real' setting of the novel is an unnamed English city, in the near future when for some mysterious reason civilisation is crumbling. Gangs or tribes of people are moving through the city, heading for the north-west where they believe, on scanty evidence, life will be better. The narrator, a single middle-aged woman about whom we learn virtually nothing, is mysteriously put in charge of a young girl, Emily, who has for a pet a hybrid cat/dog, Hugo, an animal who comes to embody the old-fashioned virtues of loyalty and honour, when they are largely abandoned by humans. Beyond the wall of her flat, the narrator finds herself in a large house, whose rooms are at first shabby and over-furnished, but the condition of which changes constantly. This is the 'impersonal' world; shortly after Emily's arrival, the narrator begins to be subjected, beyond the wall, to a child's-eye view of an oppressive nursery where 'personal' scenes from the childhood of Emily and her baby brother are played out. Meanwhile, in the 'real' world, Emily goes unnaturally rapidly through the stages of adolescence, becoming the lover and helpmate (the old-fashioned word is quite appropriate here) of Gerald, the leader of one of the gangs gathering in the streets outside. As conditions worsen and the danger

increases, Gerald tries to civilise a gang of children who have never known family life, and who are without loyalty, friendship, memory or even much language. In the same way that Harriet's refusal to exclude Ben from the family in *The Fifth Child* destroyed her family, this crusade of Gerald's breaks up his former gang, which had set up a community in an abandoned house. Cannibalism and violence become common among these children, and the narrator, Emily and eventually Gerald are besieged in the flat until the wall finally opens and admits them to a new world.

Memoirs is subtitled, in the early editions, 'an attempt at autobiography'. Lessing complains, 'curiously, no one noticed it, as if that precision was embarrassing' (Rousseau 148). This is not strictly true: of a random sample of ten contemporary reviews, only half do not mention the autobiographical element, and of the other five, four quote the subtitle and discuss it in some detail. Victoria Glendinning says, 'it is a very devious piece of self-revelation, and it reads like a novel.' With the insight Lessing has now provided into her early childhood with Volume One of her (more literal) autobiography, *Under My Skin*, it is obvious that Emily's childhood beyond the wall is indeed a vivid re-creation of her own early years in Persia; and the adolescent Emily in the 'real' world of the novel is recognisable as the clever, polite, uncommunicative teenager who would spend the day with neighbouring farming families in Southern Rhodesia, who would read and eat, like Emily, 'ingest[ing] images through [her] eyes, calories by mouth' (*Under* 110), and enjoyed her competence at practical, homely skills: 'doing these things I was truly happy' (*Under* 103). But without this external information, it is unreasonable for her to expect all her readers to identify and focus on the

autobiography in a work which has so many other angles – fantasy, dreams, prophecy, social comment, psychological study, fable; one reviewer even called it 'a ghost story of the future' (Maddocks 58). Also, it is rather unfair for her to complain when people fail to notice the autobiography in this work, since she often criticises readers for seeing too much autobiography in her other fiction.

Perhaps the most obtuse attitude to this novel is to call it science fiction, and then compare it unfavourably with the classics of the genre. Rosalind Wade, in her review of the book, finds 'her predictions are in line with every other science fiction fantasy about the kind of existence we may one day be obliged to endure' (213), as if the predictions were the purpose of the exercise. Lessing does not always like classifying even the *Canopus in Argos* novels as science fiction, let alone her other works. In 1991, asked 'why do you choose to write science fiction every now and then?' she answered, 'I've only written two unrealistic stories, and I'm unaware that they are science fiction' (Tan Gim Ean et al. 201). In an earlier interview, however, she claimed that *Shikasta* was the result of her wanting 'to write the Bible as science fiction' (Gray 116). Information gleaned from interviews, although undeniably valuable for establishing the intentions and beliefs of authors expressed outside their fiction, can be contradictory. Lessing (along with other writers) obviously becomes impatient with some interviewers, while finding others much more congenial. Talking to Brian Aldiss, for example, she seems relaxed, and uses the term 'science fiction' in a way she would challenge in another context. To hold her to a comment made in passing, or in a defensive mood, just because it has been recorded and published, is unfair. However, she

is consistent in her dislike of labels, and contempt for those who use them of her. The habit of mind that categorises a work of art in order to judge it is understandably exasperating to a novelist who experiments with forms and techniques, as Lessing does, purely as a means to an end. She says, ‘I wouldn’t classify those books [the *Canopus* series] as science fiction. They don’t have much to do with “science”, that is, scientific knowledge and technology. I leave that to my colleagues who really know something about technology’ (Schwarzkopf 107). Definitions are next to impossible for such concepts, anyway. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, towards the end of a 7-column entry on ‘definitions of SF’, concludes, ‘there is really no good reason to expect that a workable definition of sf will ever be established’ (Clute 314). Most of the definitions discussed, however, could be applied to *Memoirs of a Survivor*; it is set in the future, it deals with a world where ‘a given set of changes’ is introduced into a common background of ‘known facts’ (312), and it ‘offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way’ (313). Lessing’s assumption that science fiction has to be concerned with science and technology is, it seems, somewhat outdated, but it is clear in *Memoirs of a Survivor* that she wants to avoid being pinned down to a scientific explanation of the disintegration of this civilisation. References to ‘whatever the danger was that had first set populations on the move away from it’ (13) are deliberately evasive. Three-quarters of the way through the novel, a section begins, ‘I think this is the right place to say something more about “it”’ (135), and the reader feels, at last, that the mystery is about to be revealed. But

> ‘it’ is a force, a power, taking the forms of earthquake, a visiting comet ... ‘it’ can be, has been, pestilence, a war, the alteration of climate, a tyranny that twists men’s minds, the savagery of a religion.
> ‘It’, in short, is the word for helpless ignorance, or helpless awareness. It is a word for man’s inadequacy? (136)

The only tangible clue is the deterioration of the air quality towards the end – everything else is as much a result of ‘it’ as an identifiable cause, or even symptom. Whatever ‘it’ is, despite its being a world-wide situation – ‘things went on there just the same as they did with us’ (102) – in England it is spreading from the south-east. ‘We knew that all public services had stopped to the south and the east, and that this state of affairs was spreading our way’ (12). The precise nature of the threat to life as a result is made clear – it comes from the gangs of refugees moving through the city and gathering numbers as they go – as are the low-technology strategies for sustaining life without the conveniences of civilisation, and the vulnerability of everyone to the predations of their neighbours and other humans. There is also a range of ‘new diseases’ (138) with no identifiable causes. The air pollution spreading from the south-east apparently will not threaten all life, however; as the city empties of humans, it is taken over by

> plants, which grew and grew, taking over streets, pavements, the ground floors of buildings, forcing cracks in tarmac, racing up walls ... life. When the spring came, what a burst of green life there would be, and the animals breeding and eating and flourishing. (185)

If animals can breed and eat and flourish, why not humans? This is where science fiction, as a definition, breaks down for this novel, with its refusal to answer such questions. Lessing told Nissa Torrents that this novel ‘is the direct result of my meditating about the inadequacy of language. I write as in legends or in fairy tales, by means of metaphors and analogies’ (67). The

language here – the constant but unsuccessful attempts to define 'it' and the use of rhetorical interrogatives – invites a metaphorical interpretation. Betsy Draine says that the novel records 'how the institutions of a technological and bureaucratic society collapse from inner corruption' (54). But, in spite of a tendency of many critics to read moral or social criticism into the narrative, there is no implication of this 'inner corruption'. The threat is something now beyond the control of the human race, whether originally caused by us or not, that exemplifies 'man's inadequacy' (136). It would be possible to build a case for the disintegration of air quality having been caused by an ecological collapse of some kind brought on by the excesses of civilisation, but there is nothing in the text to support the argument either way.

A similar vagueness attends the rhetorical position of the novel. As in *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, the beginning of the novel makes explicit mention of the narrator – a first-person narrator – remembering and telling her memories of 'that time' (7), yet the narrator passes at the end of both these novels into a dimension outside the frame of tangible reality. Reading the ending closely, one can see what many reviewers missed; the narrator watches Emily, Hugo, Gerald and 'his children' following 'that One who went ahead showing them the way out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether' (190), but where is the narrator? She does not follow them herself, and she only saw the One ('the one person I had been looking for all this time') 'for a moment, in a time like the fading of a spark on dark air' (190). She is 'the survivor', the narrator of these self-consciously authored memoirs, but in what world is she living when she writes? Betsy Draine is right to say that Lessing desires to unify two worlds in this novel –

'in the one role, she uses the familiar techniques of the realistic novel ...; in the other she experiments with the techniques of fable, allegory and myth', but that 'she demonstrates the will but not the means to unify her vision' (61). If she had gone into the new world with the others, we could at least say that she had some kind of rhetorical position, however enigmatic, but as it is, with civilisation at an end around her, and the world beyond the wall having vanished and folded itself up as the others pass through it, she leaves herself nowhere. This is all the more puzzling since she constantly draws attention to her position as narrator within the memoirs. No amount of openness to mystical notions or metaphorical interpretations on the part of the reader can overcome this difficulty.

Lessing's description of this novel as autobiography is one that it would be unreasonable for critics to ignore, however much one is determined to discount intention, since it appeared originally as the subtitle of the novel. She expanded quite considerably on this point in a 1985 interview:

> For years I had the project of writing an autobiography originating from dreams. I had to give it up because it was impossible to organize the dreams into a coherent sequence without making the whole work extremely artificial. In *Memoirs of a Survivor*, what the narrator believes that she is seeing behind the wall, that apparent dream world, actually represents her own life, her own childhood. In the tangible world, Emily whom she sees growing up represents the image of her adolescence. Thus, reality and dream, marked off by the wall, complement each other to give an all-encompassing vision to the narrator's past. (Rousseau 147-8)

Four of the ten reviewers pick up the suggestion that the world behind the wall is a dream world.[1] Another calls it a 'looking-glass land' (Ackroyd). Lessing boasts of the fact 'that the word "dreams" is never used from start to finish' (Dean 93) in *Memoirs.* At one point she describes the present 'reality' as

'remarkable and dreamlike' (114), but she may indeed have avoided the actual word 'dreams'. Dreams have always been important to Lessing and have featured in all her novels to some extent. She relates in Volume Two of her autobiography her psychiatrist's pleasure in the fact that she dreamt Jungian rather than Freudian dreams, which are 'altogether more personal and petty' (*Walking* 36), despite her own unease with these labels as well as others. But the 'dreams' in *Memoirs* are apparently her own life, part of the 'attempt at autobiography'; so the small girl who experiences the 'prison' of the 'personal' scenes is both the narrator and Emily, this oppressive childhood being meant somehow to represent a universal experience. The baby heard crying disconsolately, even from the other side of the wall, when eventually found is not Emily but her mother – 'the finding had about it, had in its quintessence, the banality, the tedium, the smallness, the restriction of that "personal" dimension' (134). One of Lessing's more stable beliefs is in the universality of personal experience. She uses it to justify writing about 'petty personal problems' because 'nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one's own ... growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares' (*Golden Notebook,* Preface 13). So the 'dreams' and the elastic time-world of the novel do not need to be rationalised, even though the little girl Emily would in 'real' time be nearer the narrator's age, given the very particular nature of that nursery – the furniture, the clothes and the practices being those of European culture in the late Victorian or Edwardian period – and given that the main action of the novel is evidently set in the late twentieth century. Emily, the narrator, and Emily's mother are all merged into one continuous being. The choice of name has its

own significance, too; Lessing's mother was christened Emily, named after her own mother, who died young. And the character Emily, at times at least, is everywoman, a victim of 'the emotional hurts which are common, are the human condition, part of everyone's infancy' (*Under* 25). When her friend June leaves the city without a word of farewell, Emily cries 'as a woman weeps, which is to say as if the earth were bleeding' (151). The narrator can do nothing: 'I sat there, I went on sitting, watching Emily the eternal woman at her task of weeping ... I had to listen. To grief, to the expression of the intolerable' (151). The narrator's helplessness is, as it were, wired into the story. Because she is observing her own past – observing 'a young self grow up' (*Under* 28) – she has to watch without participating, as she cannot change what has already happened. Naturally this impotence carries over into the dream world behind the wall. The only intervention she makes in the 'personal' world there is when she finds the baby who is Emily's mother crying and takes her up to comfort her: 'A pretty, fair little girl, at last finding comfort in my arms' (134). After this, the impersonal world behind the wall begins to disintegrate into anarchy, 'or perhaps it was only that I was seeing what went on there more clearly' (140), which is at its height when instead, moving beyond the wall, she finds gardens, layers of gardens under 'a fresh delightful sky ... that I knew was the sky of another world, not ours' (141), and

> though it was hard to maintain a knowledge of that other world with its scent and running waters and its many plants while I sat here in this dull, shabby daytime room, the pavements outside seething as usual with its tribal life – I did hold it. ... Towards the end it was so; intimations of that life, or lives, became more powerful and frequent in 'ordinary' life, as if that place were feeding and sustaining us, and wished us to know it. (143)

Perhaps the achievement of intervention with Emily's mother is what enables this breakthrough to the simultaneous knowledge of both worlds, which presumably allows the escape from the helplessness of the 'real' world at the end of the novel.

The autobiographical element extends beyond the narrator's experience of 'ridiculous impatience, the helplessness, of the adult who watches a young thing growing' (84-85), which is helplessness not only because she cannot change her own past which is repeated in Emily's present, but because 'the biological demands of her [Emily's] age took a precise and predictable and clock-like stake on her life' (85). The disintegrating society of the city, in which the narrator, once again, takes little part and acts principally as an observer, represents

> a general worsening of conditions ... as has happened in my lifetime. Waves of violence sweep past – represented by gangs of young and anarchic people – go by, and vanish. These are the wars and movements like Hitler, Mussolini, Communism, white supremacy, systems of brutal ideas that seem for a time unassailable, then collapse. (*Under* 28-9)

This is an interpretation of the novel none of the ten reviewers made. They all saw the disintegration of civilisation and the lawless gangs as a projection into the near future, rather than a metaphor for what has already happened in the twentieth century.

'To me,' Lessing says, 'nothing seems more simple than the plan of this novel' (*Under* 28). This simplicity is not, however, readily apparent, and she must have expected, after twenty-five years of writing for publication, that her readers would not all interpret the book exactly as she intended. The reviewers who picked up the autobiographical hint could see that it was Emily who

represented the narrator's childhood. One added, 'perhaps also Lessing's own child, Peter' (Rubenstein 21) – and if Peter, why not the two older children left behind in Southern Rhodesia? But to take the child Emily as the universal child, representative of 'the human condition', ignores the other child behind the wall, the adored little brother. What happens to the cosseted and indulged child, while the ignored one grows up too fast? One example appears in Lessing's 1995 novel, *Love, Again*, where the protagonist, Sarah, has a younger brother, Hal (Lessing's own brother's name was Harry). Her memories of their childhood follow the same pattern as that of Emily and her baby brother, and of the young Doris and her brother Harry which is described in *Under My Skin.* Harry Tayler is a background figure in the two volumes of autobiography published so far, distancing himself from his unhappy mother's nagging and attention-seeking by becoming 'polite, cool; [he] appeared to listen but took no notice' (*Under* 158); 'Harry, as it would now be put, was not a man in touch with his emotions' (*Under* 371). So the real person became self-sufficient in the extreme, and shut off his emotions. The man in *Love, Again*, though, is an overgrown child, making outrageous demands of other people, a 'big babyish man, with his little tummy, his little double chin, his self-absorbed mouth' (332) even in his sixties, by which age the real Harry described in *African Laughter* has become 'a cautious man, slow to react, but not cut off by silence from what he saw around him' (35), not only because of his new hearing aid, but from a more receptive attitude to his sister.

There is no little brother in the 'real' world of *Memoirs*. Glendinning points out, 'this is a woman-centred book,' although Lessing claims otherwise: 'A middle-aged person – the sex does not matter – observes a young self grow

up' (*Under* 28). However, if it were depicting a male narrator watching a young boy grow to maturity, the novel would be unrecognisably different. Specifically female aspects are fundamental – Emily's 'woman's tears', the frustration and cruelty of Emily's mother, Emily's choosing to be Gerald's assistant, 'the leader of the commune's woman' (99), rather than 'a chieftainess, a leader on her own account' (98) because she is in love. The narrator insists that this state of affairs is realistic, in spite of Emily's 'capacities and talents' (98); 'This is a history, after all, and I hope a truthful one' (99).

There is a conflict between this insistence on the truth of this portrait of an individual with a specific history, and the claim that she represents everyone. The belief that all experiences are universal, which Lessing has used to justify writing about the personal, sits awkwardly with the belief in the individual she talks about in her 1985 book *Prisons We Choose to Live Inside*: 'Everything that has ever happened to me has taught me to value the individual, the person who cultivates and preserves her or his own way of thinking, who stands out against group thinking, group pressures' (83). *Memoirs of a Survivor* gives little clue as to how this individual is formed, 'the individual, in the long run, who will set the tone, provide the real development in a society' (*Prisons* 82), unless it is by being the excluded one, the unloved, the exile in one's family and society. By implication, these are the people, like Lessing, like her narrator in *Memoirs*, like Martha Quest and a long line of protagonists ending, for the moment, with Mara in *Mara and Dann*, who have the critical eye needed to view their society with detachment, who can stand out against the group, while the secure, integrated people who have been happy

in childhood fit easily into society and unthinkingly conform to its rules. These are the people who would seem to be described by another of the narrator's absolute statements:

> How else do things work always unless by imitation bred of the passion to be like? All the processes of society are based on it, all individual development. … There was some sort of conspiracy of belief that people – children, adults, everyone – grew by an acquisition of unconnected habits, of isolated bits of knowledge, like choosing things off a counter … But in fact people develop for good or for bad by swallowing whole other people, atmospheres, events, places – develop by admiration. (51-52)

Many of her characters – most of the protagonists of her novels – seem, on the contrary, to have been formed by the opposite; by a reaction against emulation of others, a resistance to conformity. In *Under My Skin*, she recalls 'the unforgiving clarity of the adolescent, sharpened by fear that this might be your fate too. "I will not, I will not," I kept repeating to myself, like a mantra' (157). Sometimes it seems, in *The Golden Notebook*, *The Four Gated City* and particularly in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell,* that she believes madness itself is the path to enlightenment, and that society's attempts to cure the insane are really an attack on these people's connection with reality and truth. But in *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing discusses this at some length, and insists 'I do not believe that ultimate truths come from being crazy. I've seen too much of craziness,' in spite of what she implies in *The Golden Notebook* 'whose structure, at least, says that an over-aridity can be cured by "breakdown"' (243). She sees her propensity to write about madness as a pattern in her own mind, which 'has to be in other people's minds, must be, for we are not sufficient to ourselves' (244). Somehow, there must be a way of

accommodating these conflicting beliefs in individuality and universality. In the preface to *The Golden Notebook*, she says

> Nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one's own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions – and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas – can't be yours alone.

So far, this denies uniqueness, but makes no claim for universality. But the paragraph ends, 'one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares' (13). Everyone? She frequently uses hyperbole – she says 'no one' noticed *Memoirs* was an autobiography, meaning many people did not; and in this case she perhaps means many people share one's experiences when she actually says 'everyone' does. Can it make sense to say, though, that experiences can be both unique to individuals and universal? Lessing obviously feels that she is a unique person, but it is an intellectual discipline for her to insist that other people have the same experiences and feelings, and therefore, of course, the same rights. It is in this sense a political belief. But it excludes the possibility, which is of vital interest to most novelists, that other people may be profoundly different to oneself, and that recognising that difference and allowing for it can also be a worthwhile intellectual discipline. This belief, while allowing her to see the tyranny of the *zeitgeist* over her own life and those of others, and providing her insight into the behaviour of young people because she can see in them her own remembered youth, places a damaging restriction on her perceptions which carries over into her novels, where her characters are too often blurred and dulled into similarity. It carries little conviction when the narrator of *Memoirs* claims that the amoral children of the underground 'were ourselves. We knew it' (160). This is chiefly a

problem in her novels: in her non-fiction and short stories characters are more sharply observed, and often spring much more vividly from the page.

Often what one critic or reader finds convincing or effective will fail to please another. The brief review in the *New Yorker* finds that the scenes beyond the wall are 'vivid and raw, and have a disturbing power; in comparison, the scenes that depict the social horrors of the future are flat and unconvincing' (110); whereas Peter Ackroyd finds 'the looking-glass land ... too contrived to be taken as seriously as Miss Lessing [sic] intends' and Glendinning believes that 'when she plunges deep into wall-melting mysticism and oral-anal regression, fewer people may want to follow her'. The Jungian and Freudian symbolism of the events beyond the wall, particularly the hackneyed Jungian archetypes, irritates several reviewers. Lessing is, of course, quite conscious that her symbolism is not original: 'I always use these old, hoary symbols, as they strike the unconscious' (Tomalin 174). And the virtues of her style are also a point of dispute. Dinnage claims that 'the very flat-footedness of her style becomes an asset in embodying a strange or exotic theme; she is at her best when her narrative realism is used in the service of an imaginative vision' (138), while Ronald Bryden says 'Doris Lessing's intelligence is swifter and finer than the prose style she commands. For that reason, her prose works better on plain reality than on the tuppence-coloured uplands of the surreal' ('On the Move' 827). Most would agree with Rubenstein, however, when she writes, 'it is not gracefulness of style that has held Doris Lessing's growing audience, but rather, a steadily high level of intellectual energy and provocative ideas, embodied in and through her characters' (21).

And this is what Lessing seems to be trying to achieve, particularly in her novels. Her 'provocative ideas', which she might call 'a series of queries – to myself, to other people' (Bikman 61) are, as she keeps warning us, not dogma. She is the kind of writer, she says, 'who uses the process of writing to find out what you think, and even who you are' (*Walking* 228) and 'the aim of a novel is always ... to comment on things in motion' (Rousseau 153). Unresolved dilemmas like the individual versus the universal may constantly cloud the water, but the penetrating mind of the writer will never stop seeking clarification in the murky depths.

After *Memoirs of a Survivor*, Lessing did not publish another novel for five years. The new novel was the first in her *Canopus in Argos* 'space fiction' series, in which the questions of individuality and group values are once again significant. In the next chapter I consider some of the implications of the cosmic view on the ethical world of her fiction.

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[1]Interestingly, the reviewer for the periodical *Psychology Today* (Ornstein) does not even mention the world behind the wall, surely a fertile source of psychological speculation.

Chapter Eleven

Floating Away: Alienation and Distance in Doris Lessing's Space Fiction.

'You have to write cold,' Lessing said to Sedge Thomson in 1989, 'You can't write hot; otherwise it's no good' (190). In order to 'write cold', Lessing has found it necessary to stand back, to detach herself from her subject matter, even when it is based on her own life, or on political issues about which she feels strongly. Many critics have noted her cool, detached voice, some with approval, like Diane Johnson, who describes her 'particular, somewhat chilly and omniscient voice' (7), and some, like Beck, taking issue with the 'wry, detached observation' (66) with which she views the whites in Southern Rhodesia in her early fiction. Lessing herself obviously knew what she was doing at some level, although in 1981 she said 'it has taken me a long time to recognize that in their books writers should distance themselves from the political questions of the day' (Schwarzkopf 105). In her interview with Brian Aldiss, she attributes her cosmic point of view partly to star-gazing in Africa as a child: 'You automatically start thinking in terms of millions of years if you take that point of view' (172).

This tendency to view human life in macrocosm is, of course, most obvious in her space fiction series, *Canopus in Argos*, but it was by no means a new technique for her. Anna, in *The Golden Notebook*, plays a game in which she sits and takes herself progressively further away from herself, viewing herself at last from a great height, and in *Landlocked*, the chapter after Martha's lover Thomas leaves begins with a detached view of a street in which Martha stands. 'From the sky, the town would announce itself as much by trees as by buildings ... . Night or day, it was trees, then buildings, that showed where man had staked his claim on the grass-covered high veld' (196). The view then expands to 'nearly a hundred miles away' (196), where the Quests' abandoned house has 'sunk to its knees under the blows of the first wet season after the Quests had left it', and then expands into time; 'For how many

millions of years has the central plateau stood high and dry, dry above all, lifting upwards to the drought-giving skies?' (197). The cosmic view is then directed towards Europe, where 'cities still stood in ruins and people in the cities expected a hungry winter', where 'forty-four million people had died in the last war. (But what was the use of saying forty-four million ... when one could not *feel* more than, let's say, half a million, and even that with difficulty, after long strain)' (197-8). Lessing's use of distancing as an ethical method is here quite clear.

The related technique of viewing society through alien eyes can be seen even earlier, in *The Grass is Singing*, which originated from an interest in the point of view of an outsider, a young idealist from England (see Thorpe 99), in the climactic events of the novel, and in 'Hunger', where white society is viewed through the eyes of a black village boy newly arrived in the city. As I mention in Chapter Nine, this could be seen an example of the defamiliarisation process in fiction postulated by the Russian Formalist Shklovsky. Shklovsky's ideas contributed to Brecht's 'verfremdungseffekt' or alienation effect, whereby he tried to prevent the audience from becoming emotionally involved in a play so that they may be intellectually aroused instead, and thus (in theory) more open to the political message. Robert Arlett discusses Brecht's possible influence on *The Golden Notebook*, claiming that

> the undercutting of assumed or expected versions of reality parallels Brechtian distancing technique ... and it is also a reflection of the complexities of modern experience and of the difficulties in reaching a moral stance in the face of those complexities. (70)

Lessing's version of the alienation technique is, however, a little different to Brecht's, and resembles Marcuse's view of the responsibility of the artist, which he describes as 'artistic *alienation*', as explained by Fishburn:

> For him, the function of the artist is to oppose the status quo and the state – an opposition that implies a commitment to those who are adversely affected by the status quo and who cannot articulate (or perhaps even see) their subordination to the needs of the state. (*Unexpected Universe* 8)

Lessing, unlike Brecht, usually seems to have no objection to her readers' identifying with the characters in her fiction, although it is true she does not always actively encourage it. For her, the important thing is to show other points of view, to challenge the mainstream values. 'I like to think that if someone's read a book of mine, they've had ... the literary equivalent of a shower. Something that would start them thinking in a slightly different way perhaps' (Frick 164).

Logically, authors could write from any point of view, including their own, to challenge their reader's thinking. The author's own point of view will always be different to that of the reader in some ways, and very subjective personal writing can indeed be very enlightening. One assumes that Lessing is more or less speaking from her own viewpoint when her subject is a white woman with a similar history to her own. Without assuming absolute equivalence, for example, one ascribes much of the subjective experience of Martha Quest in the first four novels of the *Children of Violence* series to the author. She expresses annoyance at questions about what aspects of her books are autobiographical – 'in a sense, everything *has* to be autobiographical, of course; but on the other hand, you can also say that it isn't autobiographical at all, because as soon as you begin writing it changes into something else' (Tomalin 173) – and believes it is not important for the reader to distinguish autobiography from fiction. Nevertheless, Eve Bertelsen noticed in her 1986 interview that she would talk about Martha Quest, and Lessing would respond by talking about herself (143), which betrays a strong autobiographical identification. Discussing her subject matter with Stephen Gray, she said,

> You start off with your life and the need to define yourself and this frightful struggle to make this statement of what you are, to find out what it is. Then you do sort of float away from that, instead of being embedded in it, you see yourself from a distance. (118)

It is interesting, though, that in this exploration of her own identity, her sexual, emotional and political life is covered in depth, while her writing is entirely

ignored. Martha Quest is not creative in any way. Even in *The Golden Notebook*, although the main character, Anna, is a writer, she suffers from writer's block.

Leaving aside the question of exact identification with Martha and Anna, there are many clear examples of her deliberately setting out to inhabit subjects significantly different from herself. One striking instance is *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, where she was initially not only writing in the first person of Jane Somers, but impersonating her as well, keeping her own authorship secret for some time. Commenting on this experience, she said, 'It's amazing what you find out about yourself when you write in the first person about someone very different from you' (Frick 163). And an extra layer of impersonation is added when Jane Somers, as narrator/protagonist, makes herself imagine in detail the daily experiences of other characters in the novel – 'Maudie's day' – 'I wrote Maudie's day because I want to understand' (134), and later 'A Day in the Life of a Home Help' (189), as well as her own day, 'Janna's day' (131). As a character, Janna is struggling to really *see* (as Iris Murdoch would say) other people, and imagining and narrating their experiences from their own points of view is part of her method. She even becomes a novelist, writing a romantic novel during the course of the narrative, based on what she has learned about Maudie's life.

In 1972, Josephine Hendin remarked to Lessing,

> I get the feeling sometimes in many of your stories that people see each other as though they were space travelers looking at aliens on another planet – that somehow the distance between people is sufficiently great, or between people and the lives they are leading. The sense of disillusionment becomes so great that there's a feeling of immense distance. (44)

This interview predates the *Canopus* series by seven years, and shows how these techniques were evident in her work long before she started actually setting novels in outer space. Lessing replied to Hendin's comment, 'This business of using people from outer space is a very ancient literary device, isn't

it? It's the easiest way of trying to make the readers look at a human situation more sharply.' However, with this sharpness of the view there is a sacrifice in the emotional and thus intellectual impact fiction can have when it concentrates on the microcosmic, individual experience.

The two novels which comprise *The Diaries of Jane Somers* were the first books Lessing published after the *Canopus* series (the last of which is still *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*, despite her stated intention as late as 1993 (Ingersoll 240) to write a sixth.) They allow her once again to exercise her talent for describing minute details, which was somewhat quelled in the space fiction novels. The gritty, grimy, silk and satin world of Jane Somers springs almost palpably from the pages, and this naturalism is a welcome celebration of imperfect human life; a relief in contrast to the distant Canopean eye which usually disdains such close attention to detail, and looks at movements of humans from a galactic perspective. Lessing said in 1980, 'what is not realistic is slippery ground. One must accumulate enough daily details in order that the reader isn't lost, since he requires the presence of mundane details so that he can then respond to the irrational' (Torrents 67). Mundane details are not completely absent from the space fiction series; the second, *The Marriages between Zones Three, Four and Five* and the fourth, *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, are both fables told from the point of view of, not literally Earthbound, but planet-bound colonial subjects of the Canopean empire, and Volume 1, *Shikasta*, contains entries from the diaries of a teenage girl with a very tenuous grasp on the cosmic view of her brother George, an incarnated Canopean agent. It is no coincidence that these are the most readable and memorable parts of the series.

Katherine Fishburn writes, ‘it is in science fiction, a form she has come to by circuitous routes, that she is able to oppose the politics of the status quo to best advantage and to affirm her commitment to the greater good of humanity’ (*Unexpected Universe* 10). The omniscient Canopeans, however, are unable to explain their understanding of ‘Necessity’ to non-Canopeans, and need to promote an ethic of blind obedience to a higher order believed to be benevolent – the instructions for ‘a safe and wise existence on Shikasta’ to a tribe that showed ‘honesty, hospitality, and above all a hunger for something different’ in a time of degeneration, are ‘moderation, abstention from luxury, plain living, care for others’ and so forth, ‘and above all, a quiet attention to what is most needed from them, obedience’ (139). Rachel Sherban, in *Shikasta*, says ‘you don’t understand something until you see the results’ (324): as Jeannette King notes, ‘this smacks suspiciously of the end justifying the means’ (79). In *Marriages*, none of the characters can fathom the reasons for the orders they receive from The Providers, although Al·Ith has a suspicion that it is to do with ending complacency and stagnation in her Zone. Ambien II in *The Sirian Experiments* constantly asks her Canopean mentor Klorathy the wrong questions, but he never suggests to her which are the right ones; and she performs the rituals prescribed by Canopus with rigour but no understanding. And in *The Sentimental Agents*, Johor is able to suggest some strategies to various Volyen communities to fend off the worst disasters of the Sirian invasions, but is unable to provide enlightenment.

Talking to Brian Aldiss, Lessing explained the origin of the *Canopus* series:

> I read the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, the New Testament, and the Koran. I found the similar idea of the warner or prophet, who arrives from somewhere and tells the people they should behave differently, or

> else! … My language is not religious so I did it in space-fiction terms and created a good empire. (Aldiss 170)

Canopus, then, occupies the position of God – all-knowing, virtually immortal, although their omniscience does not give them omnipotence, as *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* shows: when the forces of cosmic nature are at work, even Canopus cannot prevent the physical annihilation of all life on Planet 8. In the first four volumes, Canopus appears all-wise, lofty, self-sacrificing and compassionate. In *Shikasta*, the archives betray little humour, no anger, but much sorrow for the inhabitants of Shikasta, the Broken One, formerly 'Rohanda, which means fruitful, thriving' (27), known to the novel's readers, of course, as Earth. As King says, 'a reversal takes place whereby those stories of human behaviour which are most familiar and accessible to the real reader are presented as illustration of conduct too extreme for the comprehension of the implied reader – the Canopean student' (73). The next three volumes are narrated by a variety of puzzled non-Canopeans, with the implication that Canopus is far beyond and above normal human understanding. (The inhabitants of the Galaxy are, at least those directly involved in these stories, 'human', even though they do not all inhabit Earth.) King comments, 'the alternative order [the *Canopus* sequence] offers has a potentially authoritarian dimension which seems to turn away from the openness and multiplicity of meaning and value which many see as the strengths of Lessing's work' (92). If none but Canopeans can know what to do, and all of Earth's inhabitants can do no better than try to attune themselves to obedience without understanding, this is merely another type of revealed religion like Christianity – which is described in the fifth volume, *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire*, as 'one of the most savage and long-lasting tyrannies ever known even on that unfortunate planet' (127). Rainsford points out in *Authorship, Ethics and the Reader* that an author 'is most impressive and instructive when he confronts the reader with a sense of the

author as one who is subject to the same ethical principles and liable to the same moral failings as anybody else, who is not necessarily innocent of any of the forms of corruption or oppression that his work describes' (213). The religious overtones may be a residue of the series' basis in the sacred texts, but whatever Lessing's intentions, she appears, in writing in this way, to be assuming moral superiority over, or at least greater wisdom than, the rest of the human race. She told Minda Bikman in 1980, 'You know, whenever one writes a book like *Shikasta*, it's a series of queries – to myself, to other people – as ideas' (26). But a query can be as rhetorical as a statement. As Knapp says, 'in short this [*Shikasta*] and the following volumes of *Canopus* depict totalitarian systems but neglect to question the premises on which they operate' (139). There is a remarkable vagueness, as well, about the nature of the 'higher purposes' (131) which have been forgotten on Shikasta. They certainly do not involve the pursuit of scientific knowledge, since science comes under scathing attack several times as a 'totalitarian, all-pervasive, all-powerful governing caste' (115). Canopeans do not want inquiring minds in Shikastans, just obedient behaviour, and 'to identify with ourselves as individuals … is the very essence of the Degenerative Disease' (55).

A new tone appears in the series with *The Sentimental Agents*. The satire is broad and unsubtle, and it is sometimes difficult to recognize the angelic beings of the first four novels in the jaded civil-servant types of this novel. In the first paragraph, Klorathy writes to his superior, Johor,

> I hereby give notice, *formally*, that I am applying to be sent, when I'm finished here, to a planet as backward as you like, as challenging as you like, but not one whose populations seem permanently afflicted by self-destructive dementia. (11)

The 'self-destructive dementia' is linked to 'attacks of Rhetoric' (11) from which not even the Canopean agents are immune. Lessing clearly intends to deflate the lofty Canopeans of the four first novels in this book. She would like to believe that 'despite a certain spiritual and moral superiority over the

Earthlings, my denizens of distant galaxies are finally equal to us human beings again' (Schwarzkopf 107), and in *The Sentimental Agents* she tries to undermine the solemnity of earlier depictions. However, as Rothstein wrote in a review of the novel, 'whatever promise it offers of satire and enlightened vision dissipates into cliche and platitude. The humour falls flat, the rhetorical jests become tiresome and the political insights seem derivative' (7). She herself said that she 'lost my way all through that book. I've never enjoyed anything so much' (Aldiss 170). I do not agree with James Gindin 'that one grace Doris Lessing lacks, for good or ill, is a sense of humor' (588). That she can write with a light and very amusing tone is evident in some of her short stories, and especially in *In Pursuit of The English.* But *The Sentimental Agents* is not funny at all; it is a one-joke book, and it savours of self-indulgence.

'I hate rhetoric of all kinds. I think it's one of the things that stupefies us – the use of words to stop your thinking' (Aldiss 170). As Wayne Booth wrote in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 'everyone is against everyone else's prejudices and in favor of his own commitment to truth' (70). Booth finds that fiction cannot help being rhetorical; 'the author's judgment is always present' (20); but even if fiction can be written that does merely 'put questions, both to myself and to others; ... explore ideas and sociological possibilities' (*Sirian Experiments*, Preface 12), without implying any moral judgements, the *Canopus* series is not of this type. As Rothstein says, *The Sentimental Agents*

> is ... itself a 'rhetorical book'. Like the political cliches Mrs Lessing satirizes, it calls for the 'great will, the great purpose, the great decision'. It leans back on the 'cunning of history'. It establishes absolutes of good and evil. And if political rhetoric ignores differences and distinctions, and submerges the individual in undulant swells of universal platitudes and invocations, Mrs Lessing's position is not too different. (22)

It is interesting, also, that the English language stands in for all language. In the Galaxy, there are evidently no language barriers. Canopeans and Sirians can communicate by language with everyone in the Galaxy, although they

presumably have languages of their own (the words ‘Shikasta’ and ‘Rohanda’ come from some language other than English, which implies that the documents in the Canopean archives from which *Shikasta* and *The Sentimental Agents* purport to be extracts have been translated into English.) Perhaps they have developed some hi-tech or super-human ability to decode all languages: one might expect this from gods. But the inhabitants of all three zones in *Marriages* can speak directly to each other, even though there has been little contact between them. Given her interest in language difficulties in *Memoirs of a Survivor*, for example, where language seems to be disappearing from the savage children of the underworld, and her sensitivity to language differences in ‘Hunger’, this is odd. Lessing would no doubt regard this as an example of the critical ‘nitpicking’ (Ingersoll 238) she dislikes so much, but something like this which starts the reader wondering about not realism, which is obviously irrelevant here, but basic plausibility, weakens the force of these novels.

The utopian theme is a major thread in these novels. She herself describes the space fictions as ‘fantasies, or Utopias in the truest, most precise sense of the term’ (Schwarzkopf 107). The Utopias she depicts are all under threat. She points out that she never describes Canopus itself ‘very closely, because to describe goodness is almost impossible for us – we’re not good enough to’ (Aldiss 170). Canopus remains implicit in the background, a paradigm of good which foreigners like the Sirian Ambien II in *The Sirian Experiments* are always trying to fathom, but which remains beyond comprehension. The difficulty of describing goodness has its corollary in the narrative imperative of tension; there needs to be a threat of some kind, an ordeal to be faced, for narrative to be compelling. Utopias exist – or have existed – all over the Galaxy, but apart from the ineffable planet of Canopus itself, they fall from grace. Related to this is the idea of apocalypse. This is most obvious in *Shikasta*, where Earth comes closer and closer through the

millennia to almost total annihilation by an unspecified catastrophe at the end of 'the century of destruction' (436) (which is, in an odd concession by the Canopeans to the Christian tradition, also referred to as 'The Twentieth Century'). After the catastrophe, a new Utopia begins to appear, inspired or organised by Canopean agents, of cities built in accordance with the mysterious Necessity – Armageddon, clearly, is followed by The New Jerusalem. The Biblical parallels begin to take on a ludicrous aspect when we are presented with a friendly jaguar who not only is uninterested in eating sheep, but helps the sheepdog round them up. The people are happy enough to eat meat: 'we bought some sheep and made a fire and cooked some meat, and got ourselves fed' (446) – note that the slaughtering of the sheep is passed over in silence – but the jaguar is content with 'maize porridge and some sour milk' (442).

In *Marriages*, Utopia is Zone 3, a matriarchy where life used to be pleasant and easy. However, it has become complacent and stagnant, and must mingle with the brutal patriarchy of belligerent Zone 4 to revitalise itself, before it can re-establish its Utopian status. The implied ethics in *Marriages* are rather more ambiguous and plural than those elsewhere in the series. Al·Ith, Queen of Zone 3, sacrifices herself at the behest of the enigmatic Providers, the gods whom no-one questions and which we must presume, in the cosmology of the series, are in fact Canopus. First she must marry Ben Ata, the king of the warlike Zone 4, which under her influence becomes more peaceable and prosperous. She bears him a son, but is then banished and returns to Zone 3, while he in turn marries the bandit queen of Zone 5, all in accordance with orders from above. Al·Ith suffers, Christ-like, for the redemption of her people, who reject her, and she disappears into the disembodied and rarefied Zone 2 at the end of the novel.

In *The Sirian Experiments*, Utopias come and go as conditions change, as the well-intentioned but puzzled Ambien II gradually creeps towards

Canopean enlightenment. *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8* is another doomed Utopia. Planet 8 was a model planet, a colony of Canopus, everything in accordance with the Necessity, until the Cosmos turned against it and engulfed it in ice. The few survivors, bodily dead, metamorphose into a spiritual being of unknown destination which is 'The Representative of Planet 8', and which is presumably re-incarnated somewhere else in order to write this account, a self-conscious narrative related by Doeg, the keeper of memories and teller of tales, at a later time: the novel begins, 'You ask how the Canopean Agents seemed to us in the times of the Ice' (11). A feature of the utopian situation on Planet 8 is the way the inhabitants see themselves. Their names and identities are linked not to themselves as individuals but to the role they play in society. Thus, for example, Alsi, the animal keeper, becomes Doeg, the teller of tales, when she is needed in this role. The destruction of life on Planet 8 means there are fewer roles to play, so finally those who are left fuse together to become The Representative. Utopias, at least in Lessing's imaginary worlds, are intolerant of individuals thinking for themselves.

The apocalyptic imagination needs a golden age, a Utopia which has been destroyed by the forces of evil, or the unconscious power of the Cosmos, and to which a post-apocalypse world may return. Knapp sees two advantages for Lessing in Utopian fiction: 'While on the one hand it provides escape from an altogether imperfect reality, it furnishes on the other hand a detached and often impartial perspective for scrutinizing the human condition' (Knapp 131). Why her imagination has this apocalyptic tendency is something she does not entirely understand; in her mind, 'somewhere or other, there is a pattern of disaster. So you have to ask, where did it come from? Is it in all our minds? Is it because of the war? Which is what I think. So it's in my mind. I don't like it very much' (Forde 217-8). The war – both world wars, but especially the second – understandably made an indelible impact on Lessing's mind and

thus on her writing. In *Landlocked*, the novel in the *Children of Violence* series set directly after World War Two, the incredulity of characters when presented with incomprehensibly huge statistics about the war is described several times. Lessing's need to step back from the world in order to see and take in the scale of the catastrophe is possibly one reason for her taking on the form of space fiction, as well as for her rather pessimistic view of human endeavour. But the cosmology of these novels suggests a human impotence in the scheme of things which amounts to determinism. When Christopher Bigsby tackled her in 1980 on the problem of determinism in her work, she replied,

> I don't think like this. I find it very difficult. ... You see it as either/or. While there is something in me which I recognize is uniquely me, and which obviously interests me more than other things and which I am responsible for, at the same time I have a view of myself in history, as something which has been created by the past and conditioned by the present. ('Need' 76)

'Literature,' Lessing said in 1994, 'shouldn't be treated as a kind of blueprint for a better way of correct thinking. ... The idea that one can get pleasure and excitement from reading has disappeared somewhere' (Ingersoll 232-3). However, it is impossible not to regard a book like *Shikasta* as didactic. It finishes thus:

> I am writing this, sitting on a low white wall ... People are all around me, working at this and that. ... everything makeshift and even difficult but doesn't seem so, and everything is happening in this new way, there is no need to argue and argue and discuss and disagree and confer and accuse and fight and then kill. ...
>
> I can't stop thinking of them, our ancestors, the poor animal-men, always murdering and destroying because they couldn't help it. ...
>
> And here we all are together, here we are ... (447)

As for pleasure and excitement, they are more elusive in the *Canopus* series than in most of Lessing's other work, and there even seems to be an occasional echo of 'that dull thump that comes when writers have been writing because they felt they ought to' (Kurzweil, 'Unexamined' 206). She may not have been writing from a sense of duty or intentionally expressing moral or political

opinions, and she is obviously sincere when she says that she writes from the 'holistic part' of her mind, rather than the 'critical part' (Kurzweil, 'Unexamined' 206). However, when Michael Dean asked her in 1980 whether she had 'always felt [her]self sitting in judgment of your civilization', she answered, 'Yes, I have, and perhaps it's not much use, but I think it was the way I was brought up' (87). The 'critical part' of her mind cannot help but influence the 'holistic part'. Although, as she repeatedly insists, literature does not have to be about anything, she still hopes to 'stimulate people to think, ... entertain them and make them aware of things which in the whirlpool of the everyday they might not see or hear' (Schwarzkopf 106). And she does: the *Canopus* series does give a new perspective on human life, but that view which is apparently so detached is the creation of a human being, and, once this simple fact has occurred to her readers, the strength of her rhetoric has the potential to make them suspect a didactic intention.

Lessing says her Utopias are in the tradition of Thomas More and Plato rather than Orwell or Huxley (Schwarzkopf 107). The comparison that suggests itself to some critics is Swift. In an article about *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, Hynes noted that Lessing's 'rat-dogs and monkeys wage war and mate indiscriminately (like Swift's Yahoos)' (227), and in *The Four Gated City*, Martha's disgust at 'the hideously defective bodies' (522) of her fellow Londoners has a Swiftian echo. Linda Taylor, reviewing *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*, notes that Lessing's perspective in her space fiction is similar to Swift's in *Gulliver*'s *Travels*, but 'while Swift knew his rational beings were essentially absurd, Lessing, like Gulliver, takes them too seriously' (370). With hindsight, we can see that Lessing treated Canopus more disrespectfully in her next book, but Taylor's comments are still just – Volume 5 modifies but does not nullify the image of Canopus in the first four volumes.

Margaret Ann Doody, in *The True Story of the Novel*, says that ‘the novel demonstrates that people can and should get out of their cocoons’ (467). Most narratives do tend to endorse this view, if only because staying in the cocoon is not interesting – if nothing happens, nothing can be told. Philip Thody points out, further, that many twentieth century writers presume

> that there is something wrong about wanting to lead an ordinary untroubled life. The chorus of the Women of Canterbury, in Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*, who ‘do not want anything to happen’, are typical in this respect of the target audience which the characteristically twentieth century writer is trying to hit where it hurts most. (166)

The work of Doris Lessing that demonstrates the imperative to break out of the ordinary and untroubled cocoon of existence most perfectly is *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, part one of *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, a microcosm of human life that really does ‘change how people see themselves’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 72), and even provides a kind of practical personal morality with respect to other people which is more difficult to find in *Canopus*. On first reading *The Diaries*, the most immediately influential impression for some readers would be Jane Somers’ care about appearances, such is the absorbing and convincing nature of the writing. One soon realises, though, that Jane is at first an unreliable narrator, and that it is her opening up to Maudie and the other old women she befriends wherein her moral strength lies, and which gets her out of her comfortable but restricting cocoon. Lessing makes this quite clear:

> Old age and the physical deterioration of others naturally seem to be something repugnant, shocking to us; and we protect ourselves from it with a barrier of disgust. But the real reason for this disgust is fear, the fear that sooner or later we too will be that object of disgust. Unless we are extremely lucky, that’s what’s facing us, and I think it is best to try to get used to it. That is what my narrator, Jane Somers, did when she took on the responsibility for the old lady. And if I made of her an egotistical and rather inane person at the beginning of the novel it was because I also wanted the discovery of old age and misery to come as a shock for her. (Rousseau 147)

Her didactic intention is clear, but in *The Diaries* she manages, as Booth would say, to 'raise an important question in a lively form' (*Rhetoric* 285), without seriously compromising the integrity of the narrative. In the *Canopus* novels, cocoons are not often available to most of the characters, and this is partly their point. Canopus agents do not cocoon themselves. They are brave and apparently benevolent (as the British believed themselves to be in their imperial days.) Transience is the greatest theme of the *Canopus* series, and cocooning is an attempt to shore up defences against transience, an attempt which will always in the end be useless. The space fiction novels offer no alternative to fatalism and despair. *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, on the other hand, in spite of its chill wind of old age and mortality, implies that a human being may learn a little by allowing others to get beneath one's defences, which is not only the subject of this novel, but the way it works upon the reader. The irony is perhaps that Lessing succeeds best with conveying her sense of the recalcitrant nature of reality when she attempts to impersonate a new novelist, and leaves aside the self-conscious experiments with novelistic form and its relation to reality that had preoccupied her since *The Golden Notebook*. She says herself that she is 'much more interested in a bad novel that doesn't work but has got ideas in it that I am to read yet again the perfect small novel. ... *Shikasta* is a mess, but at any rate it's a new mess' (Bigsby, 'Need' 82-3). The 'mess' that is *Shikasta* contains passages that are truly moving, like Johor's visit to Zone Six (the Shikastan purgatory) near the beginning of the novel, and Rachel's journal; and other sequences that do make the reader look again at a defamiliarised reality, such as the Canopean history of Shikasta from which 'excerpts' are included; but the vastness of its scope, which is part of its message, also partly causes its frequent failure to engage with the reader's intellect through emotional involvement. Compassion for an anonymous mass is difficult to sustain without detailed portrayals of individual's experiences with which the reader may feel some empathy. It may

be a book like those she believes have a place: ‘novels that have ideas and shake people up and then die’ (Dean 93). But Lessing’s principal creative talent lies with the other type of distancing; that of imaginative impersonation of other individuals, and *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* is as good an example of this capacity as anything else she has written. Life on Earth may be, by Canopean standards, pitifully short, but imaginative literature can sometimes give some clues as to how to make it worth living.

Chapter Twelve

Doris Lessing: Conclusion

According to Doris Lessing, ‘good novels … [make] you think about life’ (Upchurch 222), and ‘the function of real art, which I don’t aspire to, is to change how people see themselves’ (Bigsby, ‘Need’ 73). Rather mitigating the effect of her modest rider to the latter statement, she added, ‘I wonder if we do. If we do it is very temporary.’

The thoughtfulness she would like to inspire could take many different forms. It may be a change of view in empathy with one of her characters, like Jabavu in ‘Hunger’ or Maudie in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*; or it could be a cool distant perspective like that of the Canopeans. In either case, it would not be desirable for the reader to sustain such a state of mind, so she need not despair over its temporary status. As Iser says, literature gives ‘to people of all ages and backgrounds the chance to enter other worlds and so enrich their own lives’ (‘Indeterminacy’ 44-45), and she herself believes novels ‘should enlarge your mind and not narrow it’ (Upchurch 222). This implies an incremental process. If one were to read ‘Hunger’, feel empathy with Jabavu, and continue feeling that way, it would close one’s mind to the next fictional experience, and the purpose would be defeated.

She has herself quoted instances of her novels making people think and change their ways, but in directions other than those she envisaged. She tells an anecdote about ‘two extremely rich young Americans’ who read *A Ripple from the Storm*, ‘a fairly sardonic book about politics, and they were so inspired by the book that they’d gone off to join the Communist Party’ (Thomson 191). She is sometimes amused, sometimes alarmed, and sometimes

angered by these wayward interpretations. Readers cannot be blamed, though, for failing to recognise or accept her intentions, especially when the implications of what she proposes are, when examined carefully, contradictory or unreasonable. The determinism implicit in the *Canopus* novels is something she is loath to admit, but it has been observed by so many interviewers and critics that she cannot dismiss it as merely the 'nitpicking' of unsympathetic academics. The *Canopus* series might expand the minds of its readers, and make them look at themselves and their world differently, but Lessing cannot draw a limit to the views the novels inspire. She cannot reasonably say that we should read her novels and be encouraged to think about our lives and ourselves, but desist when it comes to speculating on the views of their author, or make sure that we are acquainted with her intentions before we form our opinions.

Her realisation after 30 years of writing that writers must 'distance themselves from the political questions of the day' in favour of 'universal themes of humanity which know neither time nor space' (Schwarzkopf 105) is most obviously represented by the *Canopus* series; but although there is a slight shift towards greater emphasis on 'universal themes of humanity' in some of her later novels, it is not consistent. Her criticism of *Anna Karenina* for being 'a story about nothing, about a local society, a very local, temporary set of social circumstances' which is 'not rooted in any human nature' (Bigsby, 'Need' 71) could be made with equal justice of *The Grass is Singing*: that particular brutal settler society was local and temporary. Both Tolstoy and Lessing portray the effect of these circumstances on individuals, and this is what the novel is particularly good at. Human nature does not exist in a

vacuum. Novels set in a particular society are necessarily limited to their particular settings: Lessing may find this constricting, but it does not detract from the value of these novels. In several books she has tried to overcome this problem by broadening her scope – for example, in *Shikasta*, in *The Sirian Experiments*, and most recently in *Mara and Dann*, which depicts the adventures of Mara and her brother Dann as they travel northwards through Africa (called Ifrik in the novel), encountering many different types of society. In other novels, though, she concentrates her attention on a very specific social situation. *The Grass is Singing* is of course one of these, but so are more recent novels like *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, *The Fifth Child*, *The Good Terrorist* and *Love, Again*; and these are at least as successful as her more 'universal' books. In fact, in *Under My Skin* she claims that her early stories and novels 'are a reliable picture of the District in the old days. That is, from a white point of view' (162), and that they are 'true in atmosphere' (162). She is conscious that the times they record have now 'most irrevocably gone' (161), implying that the particularities of that time are intrinsically important; and Tolstoy may well have felt the same about nineteenth-century St Petersburg.

Social and political criticism is never really far from her mind, however much she tries to suppress the 'pure flame of energy' which arises when she thinks 'that something is terribly wrong and something else is terribly right' (Bertelsen 142). This is usually a creative tension, as it is when she makes a point of showing both sides. In *Shikasta* the narrator describes in an 'Illustration' of 'The Shikasta Situation' the white colonisation of Southern Rhodesia from the point of view of the Africans; but after describing their subjection, the narrative shifts to focus on an English farmer, a veteran of the

First World War who, despite his wooden leg, managed his life with 'patient determination', who was nothing but 'a man fighting poverty' (206). This is not a difficult situation for her to imagine. The white farmer is clearly her father. This was the situation which formed her: the situation which showed her early in life that, however evil a social system might be, the individuals involved are not to be simply divided into wicked oppressors and virtuous subjects.

She carries this denial of the simple black and white picture into *The Fifth Child*, insisting in later interviews that Ben is not evil, just born in the wrong time, and that her interest was in the difficulty a 'civilised' society has in dealing with such a misfit. It may indeed be difficult for many readers to regard a child who strangles pet dogs and cats before the age of two as anything less than evil, and Jeannette King observes that 'it has been called a "horror story" by some critics' (107). Lessing makes a point of describing Ben's 'lonely terror' (123) of the institution where he was sent for a few months and nearly drugged to death, starved and restrained in a strait jacket, but the effect of her descriptions of his antisocial behaviour, his 'inhuman eyes' (116), his destruction of the family unit, is stronger, and the fact that his mother is only able to control him through his fear of being returned to captivity tends to outweigh any sympathy the reader might momentarily have felt for the goblin child.

In writing about her social and political beliefs, she is aware enough to make the attempt to show both sides, but in her latest novel, *Mara and Dann*, a tendency which is probably unconscious towards a kind of aesthetic system of morality becomes quite marked. The protagonists and the people on their side

are, for example, all tall and slender, in contrast to the brutal and mindless Hennes, a race of clones, and the ‘short and thick’ (36) Rock People who are stupid and cruel. There are the brown tunics which never wear out which Mara occasionally finds useful but are nevertheless unbearably ugly to almost everyone. In the second volume of her autobiography, she criticises one of her fellow delegates to the Soviet Union for the Authors World Peace Appeal in 1952, Naomi Mitchison, for ‘patronizing the Russians about their aesthetic sense’ (*Walking* 71), and seems to be implying that tastes are relative rather than absolutely good or bad, but such absolutes of aesthetic judgement have appeared throughout her work. Martha Quest, coming to London in 1949, finds the clothes and interior décor of the middle classes ugly, and ‘the people had no sort of charm or flair’ in spite of the fact that ‘money had been spent’ to maintain the ‘expensive shabbiness, dowdiness’ (*Four Gated City* 35). This is offered as indirect but thinly veiled social criticism, akin to the aesthetic judgements offered thirty years later in *Mara and Dann.* D.J. Taylor notes similar descriptions of ‘ugliness and ugly clothes’ (39) in other English novels of the 1950s, and claims that they were ‘lodged in genuine observation’ (38), but even the contrasts Lessing draws between the Africans and the colonials have an aesthetic element. In ‘Hunger’, Jabavu rejects his mother’s beautiful earthenware plates for the white enamel plates of civilization; in *Shikasta* the natural grace and beauty of the Africans is contrasted with the ‘stiff solemnity’ and ‘awkwardness’ of the white conquerors (200). She would certainly deny the proposition that grace, charm, tallness and slenderness equate with moral superiority, but it is nevertheless implicit everywhere in her work.

That Lessing, despite her assertions to the contrary, feels superior to much of the human race is nowhere more clearly evident than in *Shikasta*. The impetus to dramatise in space fiction the 'idea of the warner or prophet, who arrives from somewhere and tells the people they should behave differently, or else!' (Aldiss 170) does not arise from a modest and humble attitude to her fellow humans. As she told Dean, she has always almost automatically criticised and judged the society she lives in. Lorna Sage notes in her article 'Lessing and Atopia',

> In distancing her narrative voice from the 'warring certainties' of what she would see as *local* politics, she has arrived at a bleak picture of cultural imperialism. The celebrations of difference in *Canopus* are undercut and contradicted by a totalizing urge, which becomes more – not less – insistent by virtue of the postponement of total order. … The reader … often feels dismissed, excluded – or … colonized – by a benevolent (and therefore even more exasperating) authority. (166)

The satirical urge is often associated with such a feeling of superiority. Lessing, however, is not a satirist. Successful satire needs not only a feeling of superiority, and an implicit moral framework from which to oversee society, but also an emotional disengagement, a sophistication and a lightness of touch which are not part of Lessing's equipment as a writer. David Lodge, in an essay on Evelyn Waugh, writes that 'satire in any era is a kind of writing that draws its energy from an essentially critical and subversive view of the world, seizing with delight on absurdities, anomalies, and contradictions in human conduct' ('Waugh's Comic Wasteland' 29). What is missing from Lessing's work is the delight – instead she is angry and earnest in her critical views. Her funniest work, like *In Pursuit of the English*, sometimes comes close to satire but soon falls back into a more tolerant and sympathetic mode. The broad

satire she attempted in *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* fails because the tone is too heavy and insistent.

Lessing is not unusual as a writer in having an involuntary urge to express her moral views and influence her readers. Few writers are without it; perhaps it is even part of the motivation of most writers: George Orwell believed that there was 'no such thing as genuinely non-political literature' (373). The post-colonial 'settler problem' Lessing faces in her African novels and stories is an inevitable dilemma at the root of all narrative, but it is only at its most extreme that it draws critical attention, at least out of the politicised context of post-colonial or ideologically based critical traditions. Either one writes autobiographically, refusing to inhabit or 'colonise' any consciousness but one's own, and draws the charge of ignoring other points of view, or one attempts empathy for the Other and risks being seen as patronising and arrogant. Lessing tries to overcome this problem by asserting that 'one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares' (*Golden Notebook*, Preface 13). She has experimented with many different points of view and narrative voices, but, especially in her realist novels, her most common strategy is to speak personally, whether in the first or third person, in a particular tone that assumes communality of experience and opinions, especially among women. She accuses George Eliot of 'womanly certitude' (Bigsby, 'Need' 71), but throughout her own novels a type of character recurs; a knowing, wry, capable woman who understands how things work, and who is able to communicate with others of her kind by means of a shorthand of words and looks. Anna and Molly in *The Golden Notebook* are the most obvious examples, but there are also Janna and Joyce in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*,

Harriet and her mother Dorothy in *The Fifth Child*, Alice's mother and her friend Zoë in *The Good Terrorist.* The impression of 'womanly certitude' is emphasised by the fact that these women, even when they are not the central characters, frequently voice attitudes very similar to those we know to be Lessing's, and seem often to be morally central to her novels. Her belief in the universality of the personal finds an expression in characters like these, at the same time lending a dulling uniformity to her characterisation. Some critics, nevertheless, are beguiled. Patricia Waugh, who writes very perceptively on the problems in Iris Murdoch's work, claims that

> through her women questors and housekeepers from Martha to Alice in *The Good Terrorist* … Lessing suggests that the continued existence of the human race will depend upon the displacement of the primacy of the 'masculine' values of war and competition by those such as care and nurturance, at present associated with women and thus regarded as secondary. (208)

To name Alice, who participates in a terrorist attack in London which kills and maims civilians, and whom even Lessing regards as 'quite mad' (*Under* 274), as a role model seems little short of irresponsible.

One major conflict implicit in her ethics is between individual freedom of thought and the urgent need she often expresses in her novels for individuals to submerge themselves into the values of the group: the inelegantly named 'SOWF' – 'Substance of We Feeling' – the presence and absence of which plays so important a part in *Shikasta*, versus what makes individual people interesting, valuable and different. She expresses both these ideas, which cannot but be contradictory, so often that it is hard to understand how she can hold them both in her mind. However, the tendency is for submission to group values to be endorsed in the fiction, and the importance of the individual to be raised in the non-fiction and interviews. It may be that, because in the fictional

world she is the creator of the group values, she naturally feels confident in recommending obedience to those values; whereas talking as a real individual in the real world, she feels more strongly how crucial in her own life her independence of thought has been. Once again, this could easily be interpreted as arrogance, however unconscious this pattern of thought might be.

She distrusts language and regards it as inadequate to express the full range of human experience, and she hates 'rhetoric … the use of words to stop your thinking' (Aldiss 170). In various ways she has tried to overcome these problems. *The Golden Notebook* is one example: in that case she tried to use the form of the novel 'to make its own comment, a wordless statement: to talk through the way it was shaped' (*The Golden Notebook*, Preface 13). In parts of this novel, and later in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, her narrators attempt to write descriptions of whole days with no omissions, trying in this way to combat the selective nature of fiction. She would not wish her narratives to conform with Brooks' theory of the nineteenth century novel that 'the state of normality is devoid of interest, energy, and the possibility for narration' (139). The attempt to be comprehensive is, of course, doomed to failure, and, as Iser says,

> no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the *whole* picture before his reader's eyes. If he does, he will very quickly lose his reader, for it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text. ('Reading Process' 57)

Lessing's attempts to do so are usually brief enough to be interesting, but she still has a tendency to leave too little to the reader's imagination, and this, along with the 'womanly certitude' of many of her characters, can occasionally lead to tedium. Even the questing, interrogative quality she often builds into

her prose – the question marks at the ends of statements, the interruption of sentences with '… but what?' – seems to arise from a kind of confident agnosticism which language cannot express but which nevertheless exists as a foundation of her ethical system. *Memoirs of a Survivor* is another attempt at a solution to the inadequacy of language; writing 'by means of metaphors and analogies' in order to avoid 'contaminated words', full of 'traditional associations' (Torrents 66-67).

Her definition of rhetoric is highly rhetorical: rhetoric does not have to mean 'the use of words to stop your thinking', but is more properly regarded as the use of words to persuade others of one's meaning. Its relation to truthfulness is not at all stable: a rhetorician is not automatically a liar. She herself, naturally, is at her most rhetorical when at her most earnest and concerned to convince her readers of the truth of her statements. The Preface to *The Golden Notebook* is a highly rhetorical piece of writing, full of generalisations and condemnations of society, teachers, critics, academics; insisting that, although 'no one seems to think it … there is something seriously wrong with our literary system' (20). This kind of rhetoric may indeed, on analysis, be intended by Lessing to stop our thinking – at least where it disagrees with her thinking – but despite her evident desire to persuade everyone of the evils of the 'literary system', most readers would find its style too strident to be convincing. William Pritchard, in a 1995 article titled 'Looking Back at Lessing', observes that 'critical accounts of Lessing's contribution and stature as a writer of fiction mainly bypass her style by acting as if she didn't have one, or at least that it is of not much account, since the substance of what she says is so important' (321). He mentions the progression

from the ‘leisurely, extremely conventional novelese’ (321) of the early novels, to the ‘toneless solemn inner journeys’ (323) of the early 1970s, concluding that ‘I would trade the last twenty years’ worth of Lessing’s novels for the stories and sketches’ in *The Real Thing*: ‘Lessing’s prose here has the kind of relaxed power and delicacy … that has been so absent from the anguished, hard-driving, monumentally solemn world of her longer fictions’ (323-4).

As for symbolism, she falls into difficulties when her intentional use of the familiar archetypes becomes overuse. She believes that the ‘old hoary symbols … strike the unconscious’ (Tomalin 174), but readers who are sensitised to these symbols, like some of the reviewers of *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, are likely to erect a barrier automatically against such obvious attempts to speak directly to their emotions, just as her more strident rhetorical statements may work against her.

Michael Magie extrapolates a ‘composite image’ of Lessing from her fiction, in a 1977 article:

> She is the woman possessed of a strong commitment to rationality and to moral responsibility for herself and others, but afraid that reason and morality may deprive her of joy and yet fail to yield her the truth. Moreover, what truth they do teach suggests that human powers, taken singly or altogether, are not after all very great. … Out of such fears and desires, and with penetrating intelligence, she turns to the rest of us, saying, ‘You see this bit of lovely, consoling nonsense. Our only hope lies in that. Embrace it.’ (532)

This acute analysis was written, impressively, before the publication of the first novel in the *Canopus* series. Despite all this, however, Lessing is a hugely influential writer. *The Golden Notebook* is clearly recognisable as a source of inspiration for much of the English ‘women’s fiction’ of the 1960s and 1970s, and Joyce Carol Oates states confidently that it ‘has radically changed the consciousness of many young women (‘One Keeps Going’ 37). All her books

(except *Retreat to Innocence*, the one book she has refused to let her publishers reissue) are still in print. Her new publications are routinely reviewed in the major journals. Early in 1999 her publishers arranged an Internet 'Author chat' session, and virtually every one of the questioners paid a tribute of some kind to Lessing's influence in their lives as a moralist or a teacher. The manifold contradictions in her system of beliefs – the conflict between determinism and free will, the group versus the individual, the wish to see books and education made readily available in third world countries while at the same time condemning the education system as a brainwashing enterprise – arise out of her restless quest for the truth. Had she been through the conventional education system, she may have been able to rationalise and perhaps even reconcile some of these contradictions. She may have developed her critical faculties more highly in order to subject some of her more outrageous generalisations and beliefs to a more rigorous analysis. She may think twice before making statements like 'every adolescent is like every other adolescent' (Thomson 186), and 'there is only one way to read, which is to browse in libraries and bookshops, picking up books that attract you, reading only those …' (*Golden Notebook*, Preface 17-18). But a Doris Lessing who dutifully finished school and proceeded to a conventional university education would be a very different writer. She stimulates criticism, and her arguments are not of a kind calculated to silence her critics: the agenda, nevertheless, is hers. However much opinions differ, she has broached many huge subjects like colonialism, the position of women, the nature of politics, the treatment and diagnosis of mental illness, environmental destruction, education – subjects far too numerous to list. Her great quality as a writer is her questing, combative

attitude, and the critic, however necessary and rational the criticism and analysis may be, would be unreasonable to wish it otherwise. As Magie says, 'Doris Lessing is worthy, I believe, of being disagreed with' (531).

Chapter Thirteen

V.S. Naipaul: Introduction

V. S. Naipaul has a tendency to enrage some of his readers. Antiguan expatriate writer Jamaica Kincaid says, for example, 'he just annoys me *so* much, all my thoughts are intemperate and violent … I think probably the only people who'll say good things about him are Western people, right-wing people' (Winokur 121). She implies that, if the response to him is political, he himself has a conservative political bias. However, he says his forthright expressions of his opinions have nothing to do with politics and arise from his interest in the truth:

> Certain subjects are so holy that it becomes an act of virtue to lie … never say 'bush people', never say 'backward country', never say 'boring people', never say 'uneducated'. But turn away from what is disagreeable and what happens in the end is that you encourage the chaps there to start lying about themselves too. So they lie because it's what is expected of them. Soon everyone begins to lie. (Kakutani)

There may be no political ideology involved, but there is certainly a personal bias, which he admits later in the same interview: 'I do not have the tenderness more secure people can have towards bush people … I feel threatened by them. My attitude and the attitude of people like me is quite different from people who live outside the bush or who just go camping in the bush on weekends.' His editor, Diana Athill, says that 'he was born with a skin or two too few' (Schiff 141); but his fear of the enemies of civilization, and his fastidiousness, which can easily turn to disgust, is the other side of the coin from a fascination with the minute details of people's lives, and a passion for accurate observation, which make him such an interesting writer. Asked by Adrian Rowe-Evans about the 'conflict between the loving approach and what one might call the surgical approach to character', he replied:

> Interesting question. One can't be entirely sympathetic; one must have views; one must do more that merely respond emotionally. I can get angry, impatient, like anyone else; I can be irritated, bored – but you can't turn any of that into writing. So you have to make a conscious effort to render your emotions into something which is more logical, which makes more sense, but which is more, and not less, true. … I long to find what is good and hopeful and really do hope that by the most brutal sort of analysis one is possibly opening up the situation to some sort of action; an action which is not based on self-deception. (30)

To gloss tactfully over the truth is, as he sees it, neither helpful nor kind, and would betray his ethical standards.

The story of how he became a writer has been related by Naipaul many times, in interviews and essays, in the 'Prologue to an Autobiography' (part 1 of *Finding the Centre*), in *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, and most recently in two articles in the *New York Review of Books*. Again and again he describes his lack of talent and preparation – 'my school essays weren't exceptional: they were only a crammer's work. In spite of my father's example I hadn't begun to think in any concrete way about what I might write' ('Reading and Writing' 14) – and the 'romantic vision of the writer as a free, gifted, talented, creative, admired person' which he had developed, 'without pausing to consider what went before – and during – the writing of these fabulous things' (Shenker 51). Having committed himself to the vision, having left Trinidad for Oxford, there were years of waiting for the time when 'his talent would somehow be revealed, and the books would start writing themselves' (*Finding the Centre* 38), until in 1955, 'in a BBC room in London, on an old BBC typewriter, and on smooth "non-rustle" BBC script paper, I wrote the first sentence of my first publishable book' (*Finding the Centre* 15); the book being *Miguel Street*. In retrospect, he sees his lack of talent as having worked to his advantage: 'I think the body of work exists because there was no

natural gift. I think if I had had a natural gift it would have been for mimicry. I would have been mimicking other people's forms. No, I really had to work. I had to learn it. Having to learn it, I became my own man' (Schiff 153). What forced him to learn the art, to overcome the problems, is what he describes as 'the element of panic' (Schiff 153), which is

> a feeling you can't communicate, explain to other people; you can assuage it only by starting to write, even though your mind is as blank as the next man's …. And then, given the panic, the next thing you need is a certain fortitude, a tenacity, to carry on through all the ups and downs. (Rowe-Evans 33)

The panic arises from the inability to envisage any other career: 'I am nothing but my vocation,' he told Linda Blandford in 1979 (56); and in 1983, he said 'I think if I hadn't succeeded in being a writer I probably would not have been around; I would have done away with myself in some way' (Levin 94). Even then, his ambition is not merely to write, or even to be published, it is to be the best writer possible: 'This may shock you,' he said to Charles Michener in 1981, 'but I feel that I don't want to be a writer unless I am at the very top' (65). In *The Enigma of Arrival* he describes the

> special anguish attached to the career: whatever the labour of any piece of writing, whatever its creative challenges and satisfactions, time had always taken me away from it. And, with time passing, I felt mocked by what I had already done; it seemed to belong to a time of vigour, now past for good. (94)

He told Shenker in 1971,

> The thought of writing for the rest of one's life is a nightmare … I'd be delighted to stop – now. Some years ago I remember thinking, if someone said to you, 'I'll give you a million pounds, you must stop writing, never write another word,' I would have said no, quite seriously, without any regrets. Today I would probably do it for much less. (53)

He has, however, continued; but Stephen Schiff wrote in 1994,

> after every book, he complains of profound fatigue. 'I have no more than one hundred months left,' he told me one evening. 'One hundred months, I mean, of productive life. Yes. Yes. It's an immense relief to feel that you're near the end of things.' He stared gravely into the middle distance. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I recalled his announcing the very same thing – a hundred more months of productive life – to a British interviewer in 1979, when he was forty-seven years old. (141)

This fatigue and dissatisfaction, however, are part of a creative cycle. The feelings of anguish described in *The Enigma of Arrival*, the sense of being mocked by past achievements, feed into the creation of the next book: 'Emptiness, restlessness built up again; and it was necessary once more, out of my internal resources alone, to start on another book, to commit myself to that consuming process again' (94). The creative process is still something of a mystery to him, as he told Mel Gussow in 1994:

> To this day, if you ask me how I became a writer, I cannot give you an answer. To this day, if you ask me how a book is written, I cannot answer. For long periods, if I didn't know that somehow in the past I had written a book, I would have given up. The idea of sitting down and 'invoking the muse' is so artificial. Writing a book is not like writing a poem. Prose narrative is quite different from the inspiration of a moment. One has to go on and on, and then, with luck, one day something happens, and you are transported into a state of exaltation. ('V. S. Naipaul' 30)

In *Finding the Centre* he writes again about luck – that 'for everything that seemed right I felt I had only been a vessel', although 'for everything that was false or didn't work and had to be discarded, I felt that I alone was responsible'. But he goes on to say, 'this element of luck isn't so mysterious to me now. As diarists and letter-writers repeatedly prove, any attempt at narrative can give value to an experience which might otherwise evaporate away' (26). The element of surprise still exists, however, as he said in 1994: 'I would say this is one of the beauties of imaginative writing; you have two or three things you want to do consciously, but if, in the writing, you arrive at a

certain degree of intensity, all kinds of other things occur which you're not aware of' (Hussein 155). Part of this process is the refining of the emotions which provide the initial urge to write. He gives *In a Free State* as an example, in his 1971 interview with Adrian Rowe-Evans:

> I began my recent book on Africa with a great hatred of everyone, of the entire continent; and that had to be refined away, giving place to comprehension. If one wasn't angry, wasn't upset, one wouldn't want to write. On the other hand it isn't possible to get anything down until you've made sense of it, made a whole of it. (30)

This refinement is necessary, not only for the writer to 'get anything down', but for the work to communicate with its readers: 'One can't write out of contempt. If you try to do that, the book won't survive and won't irritate. Contempt can be ignored' (Mukherjee and Boyers 90).

The capacity of a book to irritate is, obviously, part of his intention as a writer. He feels that, for him, 'a true communication with a society is non-existent and impossible', but he still aspires to 'the communication of ideas … a simple desire to help – to serve' (Rowe-Evans 35); and giving offence is an unavoidable aspect of this communication. Asked whether the reactions of Indians to his books about India, 'their readiness to take offence, their deep feelings about foreign criticism', inhibited him, he replied:

> No, it doesn't inhibit me, for several reasons. One is that I think unless one hears a little squeal of pain after one's done some writing one has not really done much. That is my gauge of whether I have hit something true. Also, in India, I find that people who respond violently usually haven't read the books. And I no longer forgive this. (Wheeler 44)

He has, however, become increasingly conscious of the need to help his readers interpret his work, and the societies in which it is set. Bharati Mukherjee raised as an example a passage in one of the early novels which described a man beating his wife:

> **B.M.:** *How did you, in the early novels, get across to the foreign audience the necessary sense of a wife-beating hero coming from a wife-beating culture? Your audience really couldn't know how to respond to a hero who is also a wife-beater. In a Cheever novel, if a character beats his wife, we know he is a bad guy. For you the situation had to be very different. … there's an easy assumption there about the couple's having fallen into their roles. Everything was comfortable, you suggest, the wife had been beaten, and each of them had fulfilled his assigned roles. I think that* that *kind of easy assumption … is no longer possible in your fiction.*
> **VSN:** Not at all. Absolutely. You can no longer do that. Everybody, everything has to be explained very carefully. … These things can be very funny, but you can't always be sure your reader will take them in as you'd like. (85)

On the whole, though, he tries not to concern himself with the reception of his work:

> I never argue … I loathe argument. I observe, and I think for a long time. My words are always well chosen. I'm not a debater. How can I be concerned about people who don't like my work? No, I can't cope with that. I can't cope with that. I don't *read* these things. I don't even read when people tell me nice reviews [sic]. I'm nervous of being made self-conscious. I've got to remain pure. You've got to move on to remain pure. … The books have to look after themselves, and they will be around as long as people find that they are illuminating. (Schiff 137-8)

He commented to Kakutani, 'I can't be interested in people who don't like what I write because if you don't like what I write, you're disliking me.' Nevertheless, he does recognise that reading can be idiosyncratic, and he is willing to allow his readers a wide range of interpretations as long as they read without prejudice. Of *A Way in the World* he says, 'with this form everyone will read his own book, depending on his nature, depending on his need. Some people might pick up certain half-buried associations and not see others that are more prominent' (Hussein 155), but some of the reactions to *In a Free State* he found more worrying: 'I think … that what is wrong about the running down of this independent vision is that people seldom stay with the story. They feel that they're [sic] principles are being violated by what the writer is saying. And

then they stop listening' (Siegel). It is interesting that the question of readers' interpretations and their relationship to his intentions hardly seems to concern him in all his analysis of why and how he writes; it is only referred to at all in response to interviewers' questions.

One reason that this preoccupation, so marked in a writer like Lessing, is lacking in Naipaul may be that he decided, early in his career, that he could not expect a large readership:

> You write in London and you don't have an audience – you are just hanging in the air and being an artist in a vacuum, which is nonsensical. My reputation is dry, without dialogue, it stands by itself, without comprehension or feedback. But an artist needs to be nourished, needs an audience and a response. A writer must be supported by the knowledge that he comes from a society with which he is in dialogue. A writer like myself has no society, because one comes from a very small island which hardly provides an audience. (Shenker 50)

Ten years later, in 1981, Mukherjee asked him if he still felt the same way, and he replied, 'I think I've got a kind of audience now. At least I'm read by other writers' (75), but still, 'I am an exotic to people who read my work' (76). However, although 'it's nice to think that there are readers who feel they can see their experience in what I've written, … finally the writer who thinks it's his business to get across the specificity of his material is making a great mistake' (77).

He is ambivalent towards his audience. He 'will always be dependent on outside opinion and encouragement' (Rowe-Evans 34), but is afraid of compromising his 'purity' by reading reviews, even if they are favourable. He has made few explicit comments on the qualities his ideal reader would possess. Only in a couple of recent interviews has he considered the question in any detail. 'A good critic,' he told Hussein in 1994, 'is someone who reads a text with a clear mind; most people are merely reading to find out what they

already know' (160), and he uses various techniques to break these preconceptions and get the reader's full attention:

> In my writing there's no self-consciousness, there's no beauty. The writer is saying, 'Pay attention. Everything is here for a purpose. Please don't hurry through it.' If you race through it, of course you can't get it, because it was written so slowly. It requires another kind of reading. You must read it at the rate, perhaps, at which the writer himself likes to read books. Twenty, thirty pages a day, because you can't cope with more. You've got to rest after reading twenty good pages. You've got to stop and think. (Schiff 149)

He does not, however, expect or even wish to be universally esteemed and respected by his readers. Mel Gussow reports his satisfaction with a comment by critic Christopher Hope which he passed on to him, to the effect that 'his writing is always unexpected, and it's never entirely respectable' ('V. S. Naipaul' 29).

Unexpectedness is, according to Naipaul, a quality all good writing shares: 'what is good is always what is new, in both form and content. What is good forgets whatever models it might have had, and is unexpected; we have to catch it on the wing' ('Writer and India' 14). He is not happy with the word 'novel': he originally sub-titled his 1994 book *A Way in the World* 'A Sequence', but changed it to 'Novel' at the request of his publisher. He preferred not to use 'novel' because, '"if a novel is something that a person in public life does to show how much he or she knows about sex or shopping", then the word is "tainted"' (Gussow, 'V.S. Naipaul' 29). Earlier in his career he had regarded 'the novel writing as engaging the truer part of me' (Wheeler 43), but he has come to feel that the novel is an outdated form:

> There was a time when fiction provided … discoveries about the nature of society, about states, so those works of fiction had a validity over and above the narrative element. I feel that those most important works of fiction were done in the 19th century … I feel that all that has followed since have been versions of those works. (Rashid, 'Last Lion' 167)

As a form, it cannot, he believes, be applied to all societies:

> If you take some literary form without fully understanding its origins and apply it to your own culture, it wouldn't necessarily work. You can't apply George Eliot country society to Burma, or India, for example, but people do try. It's one of the many falsities of the literary novel today. I can't help feeling that the form has done its work. (Hussein 161)

What he writes does not need to be classified: 'This idea of categories is slightly bogus' (Rashid, 'Last Lion' 166). At any rate, whatever he chooses to call them, there are certain qualities necessary to good books: 'literary art … *must* have' a moral sense (Michener 69); they should be 'fun … I'm willing to believe that the element of pleasure is almost invariably paramount' (Mukherjee and Boyers 92); and of course they must be original. There should, also, be an element of instability: 'most interesting books have a certain instability about them which I don't find in current English fiction. … I much prefer writers who can carry in their writing some sense of what is, wasn't always, has been made, and is about to change again and become something else' (Mukherjee and Boyers 81-2). Too great a concern with plot, as opposed to narrative, is a danger:

> Narrative is something large going on around you all the time. Plot is something so trivial – people want it for television plays. Plot assumes that the world has been explored and now this thing, plot, has to be added on. Whereas I am still exploring the world. And there is narrative there, in every exploration. The writers of plots know the world. I don't know the world yet. (Schiff 148)

Part of his professed ignorance of 'the world' is his refusal to be enlisted on behalf of causes, social, political or nationalistic. 'A writer,' as he told Adrian Rowe-Evans,

> should have a dialogue with his own society, and to have writers who have got one eye on an exterior world is to use writers as a tourist trade, as a cultural or political weapon … . To write honestly about one's

> own undeveloped society would offend it; ten years ago in Trinidad, if you called an African black, the man was mortally offended. In those days many people were offended by my writings. Now, I get letters from tourist boards asking if my work can be used, and so forth. What future can there be for a kind of writing which can be treated, or used, like that? … A man must write to report his whole response to the world; not because it would be nice to do something for the prestige of his country. (27, 29)

In order to 'report his whole response to the world' it is necessary to be receptive, whereas 'people with causes inevitably turn themselves off intellectually' (Michener 71). Marxism is a prime example:

> People love making simple distinctions – left, right, colonialist, anti-colonialist – and if they have trouble fitting you in, they do so just the same. People love clichés. It's sign of being grown up to be able to use a cliché with authority … Marxism is a very big and happy cliché to discover, manipulate and master. (Behr 38)

The simple economic view is a dangerous reduction: 'unless you understand that everyone has cause for self-esteem, you make a terrible political error. The marxists tend to reduce people to their distress, or to their economic position' (Mukherjee and Boyers 91). In *The Enigma of Arrival* he admits that this is not merely an intellectual position; there is an emotional origin to these beliefs: 'the fear of extinction which I had developed as a child had partly to do with this: this fear of being swallowed up or extinguished by the simplicity of one side or the other, my side or the side that wasn't mine' (140). But there is also the question of what could happen to one's political beliefs when the creative process takes hold, as he said to Derek Walcott in 1965:

> Writing, I think, is a very fraudulent thing. When you start writing about something it changes. It becomes distorted. It is extremely hard for a writer to know what is going to happen when he starts writing about a particular thing.
>
> A well-known English writer went to Kenya during the Mau-Mau emergency. His sympathies were with the Kikuyu; and it was for this reason that he couldn't write a novel about the emergency. He didn't know what would have come out. … in the process of writing

> one might discover deeper truths about oneself which might be slightly different from the day to day truth about one's reaction. ('Interview' 8)

The implication here is, of course, not so much that political beliefs distort one's creative response, but the creative response cannot be constrained by preconceived political ideas, and writers who value their beliefs and want them to remain intact had better not subject them to the stress of writing fiction about them.

His overriding aim in writing is 'to achieve a writing which is perfectly *transparent*' (Rowe-Evans 34). In order to do this, there are various temptations that need to be fought. For one, there is the danger of 'applying a type of dramatic pattern to what I am portraying, so that I falsify the situation as I really perceive it. Or I might be seduced by the rhythm of the words themselves to say something which isn't really what I see' (Rowe-Evans 24). By 1981, he felt he had 'sat out the Forster thing about relationships and a great many other temptations. You know how easy it would have been for me to subscribe to the pretentious stuff. How many people would have liked me to take as my slogan "only connect", that sort of thing' (Mukherjee and Boyers 79). He rejects satire, preferring to be thought of as an ironist: 'Satire comes out of a tremendous impulse of optimism. One simply does not indulge in satire when one is awaiting death. Satire is a type of anger. Irony and comedy, I think, come out of a sense of acceptance' (Walcott, 'Interview' 8). He does not need satire, because 'I fear no one. … I think it is … fear which underlies a good deal of what is called satire, or the attempt to be contemptuous of what you fear. That can't be done; rather you will be contemptuous of what you love, and exalt what you fear' (Rowe-Evans 31). Comedy has its place,

though, to sugar the pill of the disturbing truths he presents to the reader as a result of his method of ‘direct looking’:

> When I am writing, I always feel that to come to some comprehension or acceptance of what is true is itself a kind of liberation. Then I thought that perhaps that wasn’t enough. Because when we read fiction we’re like children to some extent. The strong instinct is for everyone to live happily ever afterwards. So then I thought, in addition to the truth, there was a way to combat the dissatisfaction the reader will feel at something that appears to end without solace for men … Comedy. I thought, *that* is it. That all one could offer is comedy, real comedy. (Medwick 61)

He is not happy, however, to ‘beguile, to provide a respite from the constant anguish of reality’ in the way of some metafictional and post-modern writers whom he sees as ‘mystifiers’: ‘there is too much that *needs* to be said, he insists’ (Winokur 117-8). Neither does he feel the need of experiment and innovation for its own sake: ‘What I am doing is sufficiently painful and novel to have no need of structural deformations’ (Hardwick 46). He has no objection to shocking his readers. He believes the success of *Guerrillas* is partly because it is so shocking: ‘I know it’s offended a lot of people. … But you see, the terror of that book is inevitable. It’s a book about lies and self deception and people inhabiting different worlds or cultures’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 86). Other, less confrontational techniques he has used include repetition to create an ‘illusion of knowledge’ in the reader which ‘makes it easier to approach unfamiliar material’ (Hussein 160); for example, in *A Way in the World* he repeated the story of Venezuelan revolutionary Francisco Miranda four times, in different ways, throughout the book. It is also a moral consideration that has led him to reject the use of a fictional narrator: none of his books since *A Bend in the River* (1979) has been in a voice not identifiably his own. In 1994, he was still tormented by the ‘errors’ he made in his 1962

novel *Mr Stone and the Knight's Companion*: 'I like the excellent material, still, but I felt it was thrown away by my suppression of the narrator, the observer who was an essential part of the story' (Hussein 156). He uses Graham Greene as another example of this problem:

> He always has someone who is like Graham Greene in other part [sic] of the world. And there's always someone … with doubts and a tormented soul in the Greene book … and it makes the work a little … false, really, because the world isn't like that. You don't always have a man and a tormented soul appearing in all these places. You have a writer who visits them there. (Siegel)

As long as the narrator is himself, the other characters may be fictional, 'because you can't use real people to hang philosophical ideas about flux and change' (Niven 163): this was at any rate his technique when writing about his life in England in *The Enigma of Arrival* in 1987. Earlier, however, in 1971, he told Ian Hamilton that it was difficult to write about his experience as an immigrant in England:

> I think the difficulty about that is that probably every time you try to devise a story to get some kind of symbol for your experience the whole apparatus of invention that you'd have to bring to bear would be so fraudulent. How do you ceaselessly introduce the foreign character into a setting? You just can't go on doing that. That *is* very tedious and boring. (17)

Symbolism clearly interests him little: he wrote in 1961 one that he could 'enjoy *Moby Dick* without being too deeply concerned about the symbolism of the white whale' ('Little More' 15); and in 1971 the antagonism is greater:

> I can no longer, at a time of crisis, in Bengal, take an interest in plays which don't have a proper setting, where people are in a way symbols, where incidents are always symbolic, where people are endlessly looking for their doubles, or acting out old myths, or where plays are set in madhouses. (Hamilton 19)

Symbols, for him, need to arise more naturally: 'The world abrades one, one comes to certain resolutions and then one devises by instinct and through

dreams and all kinds of senses a story that is a symbol for all this. But one can't do it all the time' (Bryden, 'The Novelist V.S. Naipaul' 4).

Justice for Naipaul is a dangerous mirage:

> From the earliest stories and bits of stories my father had read to me … I had arrived at the conviction – the conviction that is at the root of so much human anguish and passion, and corrupts so many lives – that there was justice in the world. The wish to be a writer was a development of that. To be a writer as O. Henry was, to die in mid-sentence, was to triumph over darkness. And like a wild religious faith that hardens in adversity, this wish to be a writer, this refusal to be extinguished, this wish to seek at some future time for justice, strengthened as our conditions grew worse. (*Finding the Centre* 38)

As he matured, he realised that justice was not a useful concept for him: 'As you get older and understand more, you no longer have the flat view of the world – flat and sometimes cruel. As you grow older you understand people a lot more; you have greater sympathy with people' (Shenker 53); but this does not mean not noticing their shortcomings: 'I'm not interested in attributing *fault* … I'm interested in civilizations. If Arabs piss on my doorstep in South Kensington, I can't *not* notice' (Michener 64). Even the truth, his own ultimate aim, is not sacred:

> There probably are certain circumstances in which the only way you can be human and proclaim your humanity is by lying about yourself. I mean, having such regard for yourself that you can create a lie for yourself. It's very odd, but – because the truth is wonderful in certain societies. But, you know, in some places it probably isn't wonderful. I mean, why tell the truth in a work camp, in a gulag. (Siegel)

Ideas of freedom do not preoccupy him a great deal, either. Clearly the concept is subjected to a certain amount of ironic treatment in *In a Free State*, but personally he regards his own career as having been benefited, even perhaps made possible, by his freedom:

> I have never had to work for hire; I made a vow at an early age never to work, never to become involved with people in that way. That has given me a freedom from people, from entanglements, from rivalries,

> from competition. I have no enemies, no rivals, no masters; I fear no one. (Rowe-Evans 31)

In 1994, he told Mel Gussow, 'I'm very content. I've been a free man' ('V.S. Naipaul' 30).

The relationship between Naipaul and his narrative voice is one of which he is acutely conscious, and as a reader he prefers works where the writer does not hide behind his prose: 'I don't like things where the writer is not to be there. The writer has to take me, rather like Pepys' (Schiff 149). He does not mind being thought of as elitist, or snobbish; but prides himself on the honesty with which he records his admittedly subjective view of the world. Charles Michener comments:

> There is 'charity' in even his darkest books – the charity of seeing. He refuses not to see.
>
> His determination has not come easily. In Naipaul's books, as in his company, there is the sense of an opposing pull – into that withdrawal from the fray. Perhaps it is fear of giving in that brings such steel. (73)

The fear of giving in to the qualities he criticises in others, the temptations to be corrupted by causes, to be bewitched by the beauty of language, to be lulled by its rhythms into saying what he knows to be untrue; to escape into the comfort of oblivion, to stop writing and become a 'monkey': these are the tensions which seem to impel Naipaul in his career, and which give him the necessary impulses to get started on the next project, even while he comforts himself with visions of sudden death – in 1990, he told Andrew Robinson, 'nowadays I sleep with the idea of a bullet being put in the back of my head … it comforts me' (112).

In the following three chapters I look at three of Naipaul's major works of fiction. Firstly, I discuss *A House for Mr Biswas* in the light of Naipaul's

later comments about the superiority of non-fiction over fictional forms, and consider its use of comedy, its autobiographical elements, and its relationship to the influence of his father's life and writing on his career. Secondly, I examine *In a Free State* as an example of Naipaul's belief in the importance of finding the appropriate form for the subject that interests him – in this case, the break up of empires and the people who are set adrift in the new post-colonial world. Thirdly, I take *The Enigma of Arrival*, and show how its rather gloomy themes of decay, death, flux, morbidity and withdrawal are counteracted by a joy in language and an almost caressing tenderness for his characters; and also the unusual verisimilitude he achieves in this novel by his scrupulous use of his own persona as a narrator of fictional events and lives.

Chapter Fourteen

Fiction Versus Non-Fiction: *A House for Mr Biswas*

In an interview in 1995, V.S. Naipaul said, in response to the question, 'Do you think you will ever go back to writing a pure novel or imaginative fiction again?'

> I do write imaginative work, but I must say that I hate the word 'novel'. I can no longer understand why it is important to write or read invented stories. I myself don't need that stimulation. I don't need those extravaganzas. There is so much reading, so much understanding of the world that I still have to do. We are living at an extraordinary moment when so much knowledge is available to us that was not available 100 years ago. We can read books about Indian art, Indian history, Southeast Asian cultural history, Chinese art … I don't see reading as an act of drugging oneself with a narrative. I don't need that. This other kind of reading is immensely exciting for me and there is so much of it to do. (Rashid, 'The Last Lion' 166)

As novelist Ian McEwan commented in response to an edited version of this interview published in *The Observer* and provocatively titled 'The Death of the Novel', 'it's all very well' for the author of *A House for Mr Biswas* to spurn the novel: having accomplished a 'comic masterpiece' before the age of thirty, he may feel that the pleasures of fictional narrative have been exhausted for him, now he is in his mid-sixties; and at any rate, 'I think he's giving an interview out of his current preoccupations and we writers tend to do that – we push out in manifesto mode and … say, well, because I'm not reading any fiction at the moment, the whole thing's dead' (D.S.). Naipaul's narrative style has never been the drugging variety anyway: even in *A House for Mr Biswas* he deliberately avoids suspense and relies instead on his sharp, perceptive insights into character and the dynamics of human relationships, and his fine eye for detail, to stimulate and sustain his readers' interest.

In any case, fiction imparts a different type of information from non-fiction. A social history of the Hindu community in rural Trinidad may be generally more informative than a novel, but it is likely to be dry reading matter beside *Mr Biswas*. Even Naipaul's *The Loss of El Dorado*, a historical

book about Trinidad written within a few years after this novel, maintains, by its nature as an account of facts ascertainable in documents and archives, a far greater distance from its characters than any reader could sustain from Mohun Biswas and his children. Good fiction, with its subjective point of view and concern for the apparently trivial details of a life, a community, or a society, and its absence of an objectively testable corresponding reality, offers its readers the opportunity to enter imaginatively into the setting and the lives of people they could otherwise understand only in a theoretical way. As Iser says, ‘literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it’ (Indeterminacy 44).

Naipaul became a writer because of a childhood expectation of his father’s, and in spite of, he claims, having demonstrated no talent. In *Finding The Centre* (1982) he speaks of the fear of extinction that his father ‘so accurately transmitted’ to him ‘without saying anything about it’, which was linked with the writer’s vocation, and which ‘could be combated only by the exercise of the vocation’ (72). For Seepersad Naipaul, and for his son after him, ‘to be a writer … was to triumph over darkness’ (38). Imagery of darkness and light is strong in *Mr Biswas*. He is born, his grandmother and the midwife assume, at ‘midnight, the inauspicious hour’, and dire predictions are made for his future, but the next day in the morning’s ‘bright light it seemed that all evil spirits had surely left the earth’ (16). The dark continues to hold terrors, however. The night his father dies, diving in search of him in the dark pond, he finds himself ‘alone in the dark hut, and frightened’ (29). His first sight of the private sections of Hanuman House is described in terms of darkness, blackness, dimness (87), and when, after his illness, which involves among other things a ‘billowing black cloud’ which he feels, ‘unless he was careful … would funnel into his head’ (266), he is recovering in Hanuman

House, the darkness nearly overcomes him, though in this case it is not menacing so much as tempting: 'The darkness, the silence, the absence of the world enveloped and comforted him: at some far-off time he had suffered great anguish. He had fought against it. Now he had surrendered, and this surrender had brought peace' (299). Mr Biswas' temptation by the peace and comfort of the dark and the void echoes Naipaul's temptation, as a young writer, to give up his vocation:

> unless I had been driven by great necessity, something even like panic, I might never have written. The idea of laying aside the ambition was very restful and tempting – the way sleep was said to be tempting to Napoleon's soldiers on the retreat from Moscow. ('On Being a Writer')

This surrender, however comfortable, is dangerous. In a 1983 essay, Naipaul writes of his twenties, the period before his writing career got under way:

> Thirty years later, I can easily make present to myself again the anxiety of that time: to have found no talent, to have written no book, to be null and unprotected in the busy world. It is that anxiety – the fear of destitution in all its forms, the vision of the abyss – that lies below the comedy of the book. ('Writing *A House for Mr Biswas*' 22)

The temptation of the void is, however, outweighed by the terror it inspires, in both Naipaul and Mohun Biswas. For Naipaul, not being a writer would mean a life of displacement: in Trinidad, 'that society was such a simple one that I don't think there would have been room for me', while in England, although 'I tried very hard … to get a job – to fit myself in', he found 'there was nothing I could do' (Henry 23). For Biswas, it would mean the capitulation of the individual to the suffocating system of conformity and repression that is the Tulsi clan; for although it is in the shelter of Hanuman House that he is able to recover from the panic and anxiety brought on by his experiences at Green Vale, and while there, in the secluded Blue Room, he feels 'secure to be only a part of Hanuman House, an organism that possessed a life, strength and power

to comfort which was quite separate from the individuals who composed it' (302), he nevertheless knows that he must go 'out into the world, to test it for its power to frighten' (305).

If Mr Biswas represents anything, he represents the rebellion of the individual against the mass of nameless conformists. When he marries Shama and becomes aware of the way the household is organised, he finds that the Tulsi husbands' 'names were forgotten – they became Tulsis' (97). Naipaul counteracts this by calling him 'Mr Biswas' throughout the novel – even as a new-born baby. The effect of this is at once absurd and respectful. No one but the narrator calls him Mr Biswas. In dialogue, he is usually addressed by his first name, if a name is mentioned at all. The respect implied by addressing a low-status individual by formal title and surname is revisited in *The Enigma of Arrival*, where the narrator makes a point of addressing the gardener as Mr Pitton. The other characters in the novel are commonly referred to by the names Mr Biswas uses: the carpenter who builds his house at Green Vale is Mr Maclean, his mother-in-law is Mrs Tulsi, his public service boss is Miss Logie, but the brother-in-law whose library consists of the works of American western writer W.C. Tuttle becomes W.C. Tuttle, his wife becomes Mrs Tuttle and his children the little Tuttles: the narrative is so focalised through Biswas that no other names are given for these characters, even though no-one but he and his family know them by these names.

One critic has seen the Tulsi family as a symbol of imperialist organisation, with the husbands as the colonised subjects:

> There is something archetypal in the organization of Hanuman House. Mrs Tulsi is a powerful mother-figure, and rules through an understanding of the psychology of slavery. … Mrs Tulsi, good colonizer as she is, justifies her exploitation with the explanation that she is really doing her subjects good. Her argument is that which ex-colonial peoples most bitterly resent, and also the one which gives them pause. (Rohlehr 87-8)

This theory works well: the constant harping on the fact that before Mr Biswas

married Shama he had nothing but what he could hang on a nail; the suppression of his identity; the accusations of ingratitude, all support it. But Naipaul consistently denies any political purposes in his writing. In 1964 he wrote:

> Mr Achebe says that his purpose is ‘to help my society regain its belief in itself ... ’. Such a drive might produce good novels. But the attitude is political and one’s sympathy with it can only be political. In the end it is the writer and the writing that matter. ... We cannot share other people’s obsession with their images. … a country is ennobled by its writers only if these writers are good. Propagandists help little in the end. (‘Images’ 29)

He has consistently stated that in his writing he is ‘not a spokesman for anything’ (Kakutani): it is a personal vocation of his own, ‘to explore the many sides of his past’ (Gussow, ‘Travel’). He has even described writing as ‘a sort of disease, a sickness ... a form of incompleteness ... a form of anguish, ... despair’ (Shenker 51). His strength as a writer comes from his ability to control and channel his emotions in the production of narrative. Gordon Burn expressed surprise that his ‘distilled, simple prose’ could be compatible ‘with what he regards as his genetically inherited tendency toward hysteria and panic’, to which Naipaul replied, ‘Panic is there. Not in the writing. But panic is there in the writer.’ Even when he was young, he says, he ‘was always amazed that out of such profound rage, one could end by writing quite calmly. One reacts rather strongly, but, as a writer, one distills that down. If those responses were not strong, probably one would not be a writer’ (Gussow, ‘Enigma’).

The assurance with which he wrote *A House for Mr Biswas* is sustained by the subdued ironic tone. The distance he maintains between his narrator and the characters has led some readers to see this novel as principally a comic achievement, but in this he has taken his father’s advice: ‘be realistic, humorous when this comes in pat, but don't make it deliberately so. If you are at a loss for a theme, take me for it’ (*Letters* 177). The early scenes of *A House for Mr Biswas* are, indeed, adapted from one of his father’s short stories, ‘They

Named Him Mohun', 'the only piece of autobiography my father permitted himself, if autobiography can be used of a story which more or less ends with the birth of the writer' (S. Naipaul, Foreword 8). The pathos in the story, is, however, undercut in the novel by an ironic, sceptical narrator who points out that the 'unseemly hour of midnight' (S. Naipaul, 'They Named Him Mohun' 125) could only have been a superstitious guess on the part of the midwife and Bipti's mother; and who relates that the child's sixth finger, in the story a sign of 'an incarnation of evil' (125), fell off undramatically 'before he was nine days old' (*House* 18). The story's pathos and superstition add up to 'a tale of pure romance, in which … old ritual, lovingly described, can only lead to reconciliation' (S. Naipaul, Foreword 16). In the novel, however, the story continues after the reconciliation between Mohun's parents, telling the life story the father 'could never take any further' although 'he often spoke of doing an autobiographical novel' (S. Naipaul, Foreword 16). Naipaul makes it clear that the novel is not a literal biography:

> For me to write the story of a man like my father was, in the beginning at any rate, to attempt pure fiction, if only because I was writing of things before my time. … I knew little about the Trinidad Indian village way of life. I was a town boy; I had grown up in Port-of-Spain. I had memories of my father's conversation; I also had his short stories … So the present novel begins with events twice removed, in an antique, 'pastoral' time, and almost in a land of the imagination. The real world gradually defines itself, but it is still for the writer an imagined world. The novel is well established, its tone set, when my own wide-awake memories take over. ('Writing *A House for Mr Biswas*' 22)

Even once his 'wide-awake memories' took over, he still felt

> that I didn't even really belong in the exotic world I was born into and felt I had to write about. That life I wrote about in *Biswas* couldn't be the true nature of *my* life because I hadn't grown up in it feeling that it was mine. And that world itself was in fact turning when I entered it. How could one avoid the feeling of floating around? (Mukherjee and Boyers 78)

Along with the feeling of disorientation and displacement, there was the anger of the child, exploding in all directions, which the adult writer looks back upon

and channels in his writing. Mr Biswas' anger is an uncertain lostness, never sure of its justification, and sometimes becomes mere petulance. In his teens, he returns to his mother in her impoverished hovel, having been beaten by his uncle Bhandat, the rum-shop manager he was living with and working for. He tries to look for a job, but after a short time he announces his intention to kill himself, and his mother's reply, 'that would be the best thing for you. And for me' (69) sends him into a 'great rage'. He is, however, soon mollified by the respect with which his low-caste brother-in-law Ramchand treats him. Mr Biswas' moods are changeable: as Rohlehr points out, Mrs Tulsi and Seth, the main antagonists in his life, frequently claim that they are only trying to help him, and while he resents this argument, it also 'gives [him] pause' (88). When his son Anand is old enough to take a part in the action, however, we begin to see his anger as well, explosive, but purer and more powerful because it is without the adult's compulsion to register the enemy's point of view.

Humour is inherent in much of the novel's action, but it is rarely without a serious undercurrent. The description of Mr Biswas' father's funeral, with the photographer trying to arrange the bereaved family around the propped-up coffin, is hilarious – until the reader is reminded of their deprivation and poverty: the scene is immediately followed by a description of the photograph as seen for the first time years later:

> Mr Biswas was astonished by his own smallness. The scabs of sores and the marks of eczema showed clearly on his knobbly knees and along his very thin arms and legs. Everyone in the photograph had unnaturally large, staring eyes which seemed to have been outlined in black. (34)

Sometimes Naipaul sets up deliberately comic scenes, only to shock the reader into awareness of the painful situation which lies beneath. When Shama discovers Mr Biswas' attempts at stories, for example, the scene is set in a

comic tone, but the mood changes abruptly at the end:

> Forgetting that in his strictness, and as part of her training he had ordered Shama to file all his papers, he thought that these stories were as secret at home as his marriage and four children were at the office. And one Friday, when he found Shama puzzling over her accounts and had scoffed as usual, she said, 'Leave me alone, Mr John Lubbard.'
>
> That was one of the names of his thirty-three-year-old hero.
>
> 'Go and take Sybil to the pictures.'
>
> That was from another story. He had got the name from a novel by Warwick Deeping.
>
> 'Leave Ratni alone.'
>
> That was the Hindi name he had given to the mother of four in another story. Ratni walked heavily, 'as though perpetually pregnant'; her arms filled the sleeves of her bodice and seemed about to burst them; she sucked in her breath through her teeth while she worked at her accounts, the only reading and writing she did.
>
> Mr Biswas recalled with horror and shame the descriptions of the small tender breasts of his barren heroines.
>
> Shama sucked her teeth loudly.
>
> If she had laughed, he would have hit her. (345-6)

The comic tone allows him to explore the complex emotional life of his main characters without lapsing into sentimentality. It makes the most painful situations bearable, but stops short of ridicule.

Mr Biswas is both insignificant and profoundly important. Naipaul's narrative has endowed this unheroic figure with an unlikely heroism. His struggles and achievements seem to echo the struggles and achievements of all individuals who refuse to conform, in whatever setting and circumstances. Rohlehr notes that

> the purity of motive and truth to instinct and necessity which marked Biswas' struggle against an apparently indestructible system make his rebellion an affirmation of universal values; transform it from being a sordid personal struggle to one undertaken on behalf of the group. Biswas doesn't know this, engaged as he is in the fight for a house; the Tulsis don't know it, engaged as they are in teaching their children to conform and mock at the rebel. (92)

Naipaul apparently doesn't know it either: he rejects the suggestion that he intends to write universally. In 1965, reviewing a book of essays on Commonwealth writing, he wrote that one paper 'sees my work, and that of

others, demonstrating the "essential kinship of various peoples". I can see what is meant, but if I thought that this was to be the only effect of my work I might be tempted to be perverse the next time' ('Images' 26). But Mr Biswas, with his vividly portrayed inner life and minutely described circumstances, arouses the reader's empathy, and becomes real to the reader in a way that allows him to be taken as representative, if the reader chooses. A non-fiction account does not have the same impact. The following passage comes from *Finding the Centre*, describing Seepersad Naipaul's experience when an anonymous letter – possibly from members of his wife's family – threatened him with poisoning if he failed to perform a sacrifice to the goddess Kali to atone for a critical article he wrote in the newspaper about 'amazing superstitious practices' among the Hindu rural community:

> In the week that followed my father existed on three planes. He was the reporter who had becomes his own very big front page story: 'Next Sunday I am doomed to die'. He was the reformer who wasn't going to yield to 'ju-jus': 'I won't sacrifice a goat'. At the same time, a man of feud-ridden Chaguanas, he was terrified of what he saw as a murder threat, and he was preparing to submit. Each role made nonsense of the other. And my father must have known it. (69)

This describes adequately, but at some distance, the fear and humiliation of the time. It even enters into the feelings to some extent, but the last sentence shows it for what it is – a non-fictional account: he cannot say 'my father knew it', because that would be presuming beyond the boundaries of non-fiction, and entering into realms of fiction. In contrast, a passage from the novel makes bold, unqualified statements about Mr Biswas' state of mind when Anand and he are alone in the half-built house at Green Vale:

> He said he had another touch of malaria. He wrapped himself in the floursack sheet and rocked in his chair. Tarzan had his tail crushed; he leapt up with a yell, and went out of the room.
>
> 'Say *Rama Rama Sita Rama*, and nothing will happen to you,' Mr Biswas said.

> Anand repeated the words, faster and faster.
> 'You don't want to leave me?'
> Anand didn't reply.
> This had become one of Mr Biswas's fears. By concentrating on it – a power he had in his state – he managed to make it the most oppressive of all his fears: that Anand would leave him and he would be left alone. (283)

Naipaul says his father's stories first gave him an appreciation of 'the distorting, distilling power of the writer's art'. English novels, he said, could not provide him with a tradition, but his father's Trinidad stories could help him: 'Where I had seen a drab haphazardness, they found order; where I would have attempted to romanticise, to render my subject equal with what I had read, they accepted' ('Jasmine' 27). He insists that 'all literatures are regional; perhaps it is only the placelessness of a Shakespeare or the blunt communication of "gross" experience as in Dickens that makes them appear less so' (30). But the sympathy which Mr Biswas inspires in the reader encourages the reader to extrapolate from the novels and to be aware of 'the essential kinship of various peoples'. Naipaul is no doubt right when he says that 'every time you try to devise a story to get some kind of symbol for your experience, the whole apparatus of invention that you have to bring to bear would be fraudulent' (Hamilton 17). Naipaul's method is more instinctive: even though he still claims that it is an artificial act to sit down to compose a narrative, he then finds that, with imaginative writing, 'when it catches fire, it takes you to unexpected places' (Gussow, 'Enigma'). In *Finding the Centre*, he writes that 'true, and saving, knowledge of my subject ... always seemed to come during the writing' (26). So with the writer's gift for seeing the world through the eyes of others – 'I could meet dreadful people and end up seeing the world through their eyes, seeing their frailties, their needs' (Gussow, 'Enigma') – and the power of narrative itself to distill experience into

something valuable, Naipaul in *A House for Mr Biswas* transforms 'the life of someone like my father' into a modern-day Everyman's journey. He wrote in 1983 of his memories of writing the novel:

> Nothing had prepared me for the liberation and absorption of this extended literary labor, the joy of allowing fantasy to play on stored experience, the joy of the comedy that so naturally offered itself, the joy of language. The right words seemed to dance above my head; I plucked them down at will. I took chances with language. Before this, out of my beginner's caution, I had been strict with myself. ('Writing *A House for Mr Biswas*' 23)

The joy in language he discovered at that time has obviously stayed with him, or at least revisited him when he wrote *The Enigma of Arrival*. The pleasure he clearly has in wrapping, or fixing, in words experiences 'which might otherwise evaporate away' is never more happily displayed than in the later novel.

When he was writing *Mr Biswas*, Naipaul says 'I was writing about things I didn't know' (*Finding* 60). This belies the assurance, and the profound understanding of the complexity of human relationships, that characterise the novel. He remembers how, writing the novel, he regarded 'with wonder what he had drawn out of himself, the unsuspected truths turned up by the imagination' ('Writing *A House for Mr Biswas*' 23). He claims that turning real life into narrative is an matter of simplification: where in real life, acts and events may be (or at least appear) random, in fiction they must have an internal logic, an explicable cause, in order that the reader's imagination may be engaged (Bragg). This may be true, in that characteristic incidents and figures are selected or created in order to serve the needs of the narrative, but there is certainly little simplification of the feelings and relationships of the principal characters, which are so varied and convincingly inconsistent that they resist the reductions of political analysis or sentimentality, or even of rational cause

and effect. Mr Biswas' attitude to his wife Shama, for example, fluctuates wildly, although he comes at the time of his death 'to accept her judgement and to respect her optimism' (8), as we are told in the Prologue. This comfortable reliance is hard-won, however. At the first sight of her, 'though he disliked her voice, he was enchanted by her smile' (82), and his rash love-letter catapults him into marriage and the large, powerful machine that is the Tulsi family enterprise. Shama then becomes alternately a focus for his resentment of her family, and an ally. These contradictory roles mean that his attitude towards her is confused. Romance has no place at all in their marriage, but there are moments when happiness, or at least contentment, seem possible. On their first day at the derelict shop the family has assigned them to at the Chase,

> he was astonished at the change in Shama. Till the last she had protested at leaving Hanuman House, but now she behaved as though she moved into a derelict house every day. Her actions were assertive, wasteful and unnecessarily noisy. They filled shop and house; they banished silence and loneliness. (146)

And 'feeling grateful to her, he felt tender towards her coffee-set'. Mentioning the coffee-set brings in a note of absurdity, and resists the hint of sentiment – Swinden notes that 'the commonplace … commands its share of love and the author does not withhold it' (152) – and the fact that her noisiness and activity, and her tactful silence about their new situation, are exactly what he needs for comfort, rather than a shaming acknowledgement of their plight, or an embarrassing display of affection, endows this scene with complete authenticity. When she brings her first child, born at Hanuman House, back to the Chase,

> he immediately began complaining of the very things that pleased him most. Savi cried, and he spoke as though she were one of Shama's indulgences. Meals were late, and he exhibited an annoyance which concealed the joy he felt that there was someone to cook meals with him in mind. To these outbursts Shama didn't reply, as she would have done before. She was morose herself, as though she preferred this bond to the bond of sentimentality. (169)

Later, however, when she returns to Green Vale after one of their many separations, pregnant with their fourth child, he stays in bed for a week, 'observing Shama closely, with suspicion, hatred and nausea. … One morning she came and placed her palm, then the back of her hand, on his forehead. The action offended him, flattered him, and made him uneasy' (274-5). They begin an argument: 'he was violently angry, never before had he been so disgusted by her. Yet he wished her to remain there' (275). In his deranged state, he decides that she wishes him dead, and in his panicky, irrational struggle to escape from her out the window, he kicks her, seeing, 'too late, that he had kicked her on the belly' (277). From this low point, his marriage very gradually recovers, and becomes the respectful partnership described in the Prologue, but even when they have a house of their own, and the threat of being engulfed by the Tulsis has diminished, arguments continue, because this is the way they have learnt to live together.

Relationships with his own family, and his children, are equally ambivalent. At his mother's funeral, 'he longed to feel grief. He was surprised only by jealousy' (480) of those who had known her better. He manages to actualise his grief, however, through writing; firstly a letter of complaint to the doctor who behaved rudely and impatiently towards his brothers when certifying her death, and then a poem – 'in prose' – to her memory.

Naipaul is in no doubt about what he owes his father: 'his love was extremely important to me. It was a curious kind of love. I felt responsible for him, even as a child' (Winokur 116). Fittingly, Anand's first major independent act in the novel is to decide to stay with his father, after the frightening scene at Green Vale. But he refuses the offer of a box of crayons, and Mr Biswas is puzzled:

> 'Why did you stay then?'
> Anand looked exasperated.
> 'Why?'
> 'Because – ' The word came out thin, explosive, charged with anger, at himself and his father. 'Because they was going to leave you

> alone.'
>
> For the rest of the day they hardly spoke. (279)

Anand's story develops very much as Naipaul's own biography did. The feelings ascribed to him are the anger, the satirical sense, the self-awareness, the detachment of the observer, which Naipaul admits were his own in childhood. The complexity of his feelings is nowhere more evident than in the 'ducking' incident. Shama's two brothers, Mr Biswas and Anand go swimming at the harbour extension at Docksite. Clowning with his brothers-in-law, he fails to notice that Anand has disappeared into the water. Shekhar acts quickly enough to pull Anand from the water, and resuscitates him:

> Anand spluttered. His expression was one of anger. He said, 'I was walking to the boat.'
>
> 'I told you to stay where you were,' Mr Biswas said, angry too.
>
> 'And the bottom of the sea drop away.'
>
> 'The dredging,' Shekhar said. He had not lost his look of alarm.
>
> 'The sea just drop away,' Anand cried, lying on his back, covering his face with a crooked arm. He spoke as one insulted.
>
> Owad said, 'Anyway, you've got the record for ducking, Shompo.'
>
> 'Shut up!' Anand screamed. He began to cry, rubbing his legs on the hard, cracked ground, then turning over on his belly.
>
> Mr Biswas took up the shirt with the safetypin and handed it to Anand.
>
> Anand snatched the shirt and said, 'Leave me.'
>
> 'We shoulda leave you,' Mr Biswas said, 'when you was there, ducking.' As soon as he spoke the last word he regretted it. (355)

Typically, it is Shekhar, the person with the least significant relationship with Anand, who expresses the most concern for him in this passage. On the next day, Anand writes an essay about this incident which gains him 'twelve marks out of ten' at school. Mr Biswas is proud of his son, and wishes 'to be close to him. He would have done anything to make up for the solitude of the previous day' (357), but Anand is impatient and already ashamed of his composition, and the scene ends in a flogging. It also, however, results in the recognition of Anand's academic aptitude, and he is started on a programme of private lessons, milk and prunes – the regime which the Tulsis believe gives best

results in the scholarship stakes.

Naipaul was genuinely grief-stricken when his father died, but realised that without his death, he would not have written *A House for Mr Biswas*:

> If my father was alive, clearly, I wouldn't have been able to write it. I wouldn't have want to do it. I probably wouldn't have even seen the material, the way you don't see things in front of your face. … My talent wouldn't have been stretched at that early stage by this literary labor. You have the talent, but you have to *develop* it. I don't know whether his death wasn't a kind of creative liberation for me. No one was looking over my shoulder. (Winokur 128)

In other words, without the closure his father's death provided in his own life, the retrospective urge would not have existed.

In writing the life story of 'someone like my father', Naipaul had no political or didactic purpose. If he had intended simply to commemorate the father he felt he had disappointed in some ways, he would have succeeded: Mr Biswas, despite all his weakness and ineptitude, and his occasional bad behaviour, commands the reader's respect and sympathy – James Wood names Mr Biswas as 'one of the few enduring characters in postwar British fiction' ('Tell Me What You Talked' 25) – and one can only be moved by the dispassionate way in which Anand's difficult relationship with his father is portrayed, when we know that he is in essence an autobiographical figure. But Naipaul has transcended the personal, and without the intention of doing so, has created a novel in which political, psychological and social situations are shrewdly observed and analysed, in an imaginative and evocative way which would not be possible in a non-fictional form.

A House for Mr Biswas is formally a traditional novel. Swinden comments that to read the novel 'is to respond to something most unusual in modern fiction … to be aware of the persistence, in a writer of so vastly different experience, of some of the best features of Victorian and Edwardian

fiction' (157). As Naipaul's career progressed, he came to feel that his subject matter would not continue to be served by this form, and in the next chapter I examine his first major variation on the conventional novel, designed to deal with themes of exile and alienation in the post-colonial world.

Chapter Fifteen

Finding the Correct Form: *In A Free State*

> You have to be very clear about the material that possesses you, and you've got to find the correct form for it. ... One narrative goes with a particular kind of life, a particular moment in history; another narrative comes at another time, and you have to find the correct one. The one that feels true to you. (Burn 4)

The form of *In a Free State* is so unlike that of a novel, so discontinuous in all the usual aspects of character, setting and plot, that critics have developed ingenious explanations for its thematic continuity. Walsh sees 'the image of the journey' and 'the victimisation, the being alien and lost, the significance of the passage between departure and arrival' as the 'embodiment and commentary on the deepest theme' (64) of the novel. Certainly each story contains an important journey, but only in the title story is the journey itself the central image. For Kamra, the thematic unity lies in 'the latent relationship between absurdity and freedom' (149); others, for example Bruce King, interpret the three fictional stories as 'a display of entering other minds, accommodating to other subjectivities and uses of English' (90); and Hughes notes that

> the counterpoising of two kinds of narrative accounts for the unusual structures of *In a Free State.* The opening and closing journal entries present from without, observed by the writer as a recorder of his times, the abandonment expressed from within, from out of the depths, (*V.S. Naipaul* 50)

by the first-person narrators of the two short stories.

John Rothfork infers that Naipaul sees the state of exile to be universal: 'In the twentieth century man has entered "a free state", a state without values or direction. Man is in exile, lost in the desert' (185). But in a world where everyone is in a state of exile, the concept would lose its meaning. Each of

Naipaul's characters is, as Kamra suggests, 'an orphan, unrelated, in a world of relationships, of which he is keenly aware' (22). Naipaul's world in *In a Free State* is peopled by displaced persons and perpetual travellers, to whom the security of home is a concept hopelessly out of reach for one reason or another, either as something that they have thoughtlessly chosen to abandon, as in the case of Santosh, or that they have never valued, as with Bobby, or that was itself a place of desolation, as with Dayo's brother. However, these characters are all conscious of their individuality, their freedom, as an exclusion from a society they believe exists, even though it may not; and their attitudes to it are complex and various. In a television interview with Melvyn Bragg he described *In a Free State* as being about 'loss, fear and independence – personal themes'. What was it about these themes that produced the peculiar form of this novel?

Naipaul talks rather dismissively about other writers, who prefer to write novels about 'ordered societies' (Rowe-Evans 36), or 'enclosed societies: …to write about a world which is much more shattered, and exploding, and varied, write about it in fiction, is very difficult' (Levin 98). *In a Free State*, in form as well as content, is shattered, and varied, and its explosiveness – its violence – varies in intensity through the course of the book.

What is shattered, however, has first been whole, and does not preclude wholeness elsewhere and at another time. As he said in 1994, 'one narrative goes with a particular kind of life, a particular moment in history' (Burn 4). To know what has been lost is not granted to all Naipaul's characters, and those who lack this knowledge are finally the more deprived: their freedom is of even less use to them.

Santosh, as we see at the beginning of his tale, 'One out of Many', is well aware of the happiness and security he has lost. In his regret for the life he left behind in Bombay, and his alienation in his new, free life in Washington, he is able to be calm, and his narrative voice communicates that calmness. His narrative style is Narayanesque, rather like the dialogue Naipaul uses in his Trinidad novels when his characters are speaking in Hindi; a clear, rather pedantic and formal use of English, with its own undramatic, regular rhythm, which refuses to panic. He attempts to account for his new circumstances – 'the particular moment in my life, the particular action, that had brought me to that room. ... I could find no one moment; every moment seemed important. An endless chain of action had brought me to that room. It was frightening; it was burdensome' (55). He is not happy, but he understands, and takes responsibility for himself and does not try to deflect the blame onto other people, institutions or abstractions. The 'endless chain of action' clearly implicates himself as an actor, although it would have been open to him to blame his employer, or the government that sent his employer to Washington, or the accident of his birth in a poor country, or the imperial system. Naipaul believes the colonial state of mind is one which does not accept responsibility:

> One of the terrible things about being a Colonial ... is that you must accept so many things as coming from a great wonderful source outside yourself and outside the people you know, outside the society you've grown up in. That can only be repaired by a sense of responsibility, which is what the colonial doesn't have. (Rowe-Evans 27)

He gives Santosh, with his background of a secure and stable world, the most profound understanding of his lot, and of his own part in bringing it about, of the protagonists of the three central stories of this novel. Santosh is not a 'colonial'. He is materially richer in Washington than he was in Bombay, but

he has lost the feeling of belonging to a society. Having made his decision, even though it was made in ignorance, he knows he must accept his new life, its emptiness and its unpalatable mysteries: ‘it is as though I have had several lives. I do not wish to add to these’ (57). Thus the form of ‘One out of Many’, its resigned first person narration – in what Hughes calls his ‘lapidary prose and stoical tones’ which ‘transforms his life into fate’ (*V.S. Naipaul* 33) – and its acknowledgment of responsibility, its consciousness of cause and effect, makes it the least ‘explosive’ of the three stories, and lulls the reader into a calm melancholy before shattering that calm with the next story.

The nameless narrator-protagonist of ‘Tell me who to Kill’ is a more bereft and shattered individual than Santosh. He goes to England from his West Indian home to help his younger brother Dayo, whose ‘studies’ he is financing; but although he is able to earn well in London, when he buys his own shop his life goes seriously wrong. Once again, material security is beside the point. He has paid for his colonial status with insanity, the fate Naipaul himself feels he narrowly missed by becoming a writer:

> One must make a pattern of one’s observations, one’s daily distress; one’s daily knowledge of homelessness, placelessness; one’s lack of representation in the world; one’s lack of status. ... If daily one lives with this, then daily one has to incorporate the experience into something bigger. Because one doesn’t have a side, doesn’t have a country, doesn’t have a community; one is entirely an individual. A person in this position risks going mad. (Rowe-Evans 31)

Dayo’s brother has not been able to ‘make a pattern’; he does not know whom to blame for the wreck of his life – and being a colonial, he does not take responsibility for himself; therefore he has gone mad. His madness makes him a chaotic narrator; the fractured form of his story reflects the state of his mind.

Freedom here is truly terrifying, and all the more so because we cannot fully grasp the events which have led him to this situation.

Santosh tells his story in the past tense, as one might when one can look back on one's troubles and 'make a pattern'. 'Tell me who to Kill' is narrated in a modified form of Trinidad dialect, and in the present tense whether past or present events are being described. Indeterminacy is built into the story, which is, in form, a stream-of-consciousness narrative, where the line between past and present, between fact and dream or fantasy, is blurred. The present tense increases the feeling of panic and desolation, the incapacity to stand back and detach oneself from one's experience, 'to incorporate the experience into something bigger'. The narrator is confused and the reader remains confused with him. Several times he refers to an incident:

> ... it is like a dream. I see myself in this old English house ... No weather. I am there with my brother, and we are strangers in the house. My brother is at college or school in England, pursuing his studies, and he is visiting this college friend and he is staying with the boy's family. And then in a corridor, just outside a door, something happen. A quarrel, a friendly argument, a scuffle. They are only playing, but the knife go in the boy easy, and he drop without making a noise. I just see his face surprised. I don't see any blood, and I don't want to stoop to look. I see my brother opening his mouth to scream, but no scream coming. (62)

The incident, it seems, is imaginary. It is a projection of the narrator's fear: 'I know at that moment that the love and the danger I carry all my life burst. My life finish. It spoil, it spoil' (62). This vision is an image of a panic that causes trouble of itself: 'it is as though because you are frightened of something it is bound to come' (62). From what the reader is able to piece together, however, a real act of violence has taken place in the narrator's roti shop in London as, provoked beyond endurance by the 'white boys who come in the shop', he

locks himself in with his tormentors and says, '"I am taking one of you today. Two of us going today." I hear nothing else' (96). His mind is taken over by the nightmare of the imaginary accident with his brother; 'it is like a dream, when you can't move, and you want to wake up quick. Then noise come back, and I know that something bad happen to my right eye. But I can't even move my hand to feel it' (97). The reader is not given enough information to reconstruct the train of events reliably, and the imagination is thus activated to fill in the gaps. The time of the narrative is three years after the narrator last saw his brother Dayo, so presumably three years after the 'trouble' caused by the incident in the roti shop, but the reader can infer that he is, or perhaps has been, in an institution, and that his 'friend' Frank, who travels with him to his brother's wedding, is some kind of professional carer. Landeg White, with no justification, refers to their relationship as 'apparently homosexual' (205). Andrew Gurr calls the narrator an 'asylum inmate' (12) and sees Frank as 'his keeper, the male nurse, the warder of his prison' (12), which is nearer to what is suggested. The relationship includes the inevitable resentment of a dependent, which shows the irrelevance of stock politico-social analyses:

> Frank will never understand. … He is only querying and probing me about foremen who insult me at the factory, about people who fight with me at the restaurant. He is forever worrying me with his discrimination inquiries. He is my friend, the only friend I have. I alone know how much he help me, from how far he bring me back. But he is digging me all the time because he prefer to see me weak. He like opening up manholes for me to fall in; he is anxious to push me down in the darkness. (86)

The important thing about this story is the madness of the narrator, his torment, and its link to his inability to find someone or something to blame. Unlike John Rothfork, he cannot say, 'the colonial system is undeniably responsible

for the tragedy of the narrator's life' (187). His situation is an illustration of the impossibility of laying blame on anyone; the chain of cause and effect is too complicated. Gorra points out that Naipaul's

> interest lies less in imperialism per se – in its formal structures, as in Paul Scott's work, or in the process of conquest that Chinua Achebe describes – than in the restlessness it has left behind. The original sin of empire is implicit in everything he writes, but for him its 'wound', in Mr Biswas's words, remains 'too deep for anger or thoughts of retribution', (*A House for Mr Biswas* 483) and his analysis is symptomatic, not causal. (71)

The symptom that Dayo's brother personifies is the reverse side of the success stories of other postcolonial lives, such as that of Naipaul himself. Fawzia Mustafa claims that 'the story's dark irony is that Dayo's tale corresponds to the norm of the theme of migration, and that the narrator's casualty is the sacrifice migration often entails' (116). With reservations about its 'normality', this has some truth. Dayo himself has made a life in England; he has found a job, is marrying an English woman, he 'make his own way' (97), and although he is in England principally owing to the efforts of his brother, he has grown distant and does not show any gratitude or reciprocal responsibility. 'He do better without me; he don't need me' (97), the narrator says, bitter but resigned; and in the end, although through the story he tries out several scapegoats, he cannot identify anyone as the cause of his misfortunes. The reason he is more lost than Santosh is that he is unable to accept not blame, but any responsibility at all, for the mess of his life. He feels that forces far beyond his understanding and control have conspired against him, and he can only thrash about blindly and dangerously, looking for someone on whom to wreak revenge – someone 'to kill'. The narrative ends with the recurring nightmare

of his brother's childhood illness in their Caribbean village, and the soundless scream, 'like in *Rope*' (102).

After the taut horror of this ending, the title story begins with a fable-like simplicity: 'In this country in Africa there was a president and there was also a king. They belonged to different tribes' (103). The change of pace, tense, and point of view provides some relief for the reader, able now to be led by a disengaged third person narrator through the ironies of this mordant story.

The focalisation stays almost entirely with Bobby, an English expatriate government worker with a taste for uncomplicated sexual adventures with Africans. The only deviation is a short description of the life of a young Zulu Bobby tries to pick up in a bar, and who, after leading him on, spits in his face (107). Apart from this short passage – less than half a page – early in the story, we have no knowledge of events or other people's thoughts that is not, or at least could not be, available to Bobby. However, the narrator's voice is not Bobby's, and is able to present with ample irony the inconsistencies between his words and his behaviour. Bobby does evoke some sympathy in the reader for the difficult position in which he has found himself, but of the three protagonists in the three stories he is the least sympathetic. The stark contrast between his use of power in sexual transactions, his exploitation of 'the other Africans, boys built like men. … Sweet infantilism, almost without language' (109), and his liberal aversion to Linda's settler attitudes and her 'expatriate gossip' (112) is far more compromising than Santosh's Hindu-based racism, or Dayo's brother's pathological confusion. The choice Naipaul made to write this story in the third person and the others in the first person is vital in making these distinctions. Bobby is also more ridiculous than either of the others –

more truly laughable than Santosh who makes comical mistakes but is not hypocritical. The tiny defensive moves he makes minute by minute are mercilessly noted: ‘Bobby set his face. He decided to be sombre, to give nothing away’ (112). ‘He had spoken too much; in the morning he would be full of regret; Linda would be another of those people from whom he would have to hide. He set his face, the silent man’ (162). He says, ‘I am here to serve. ... People who don’t want to serve have no business here. That sounds brutal, but that’s how I see it’ (118). But his priorities truly lie with self-protection and saving face, meanwhile enjoying Africa and Africans, in the most superficial sense, as much as he can. He prides himself on his liberal relationship with his houseboy Luke, but in the end he sees him as a threat, and decides to sack him. He will stay in Africa, in the compound which ‘was safe; the soldiers guarded the gate’ (238); he has nowhere else to go. He is not wanted back in England, and asserts, ‘My life is here’ (126). Any sympathy the reader does feel is on account of the restrictions that life in the new regime is beginning to involve, which, it seems, will increase significantly, and for which Bobby is not personally responsible. But, as Bruce King says,

> *In a Free State* explores the nature and illusions of commitment. ... It is impossible to transcend the self through larger causes, the appearance of doing so is a luxury of the economically and racially secure who use others to feel a purposefulness they themselves lack or to overcome their failures in their own society. (85)

Cudjoe and others have attacked the bias implicit in Naipaul’s decision to represent white settlers in Africa, but it is clear that his sympathies, as far as he shows them, in the novel as a whole are principally with the two less self-conscious and hypocritical narrator-protagonists, who are not white. Morris points out, with some justice, that when the African soldiers attack Bobby,

'what is done to him is no more or no less than what any colonial power throughout its tenure has done to others' (102). Cudjoe says, discounting (as he often does) any nuances of irony or ambiguity, that 'clearly the narrator has a great aversion for African society' (154). Calder comments that, although 'I still admire the story enormously … his vision excludes elements of growth and hope which are, palpably, there' in East Africa (483), as it has every right to do, since it is a fictional narrative of a personal response to the political conditions, not an analysis of them. Kamra, in an interesting examination of Naipaul's work, claims that 'Naipaul's vision is not an eternal truth about life, death or love or other universal constants arrived at intuitively. It is a moment of individual existential despair which extends its jaundiced understanding to cover the world' (148) and

> coherence, in Naipaul's fiction, does not reside in the consistent use of a single point of view either first or third person. ... [It is] a function of bias. The bias of his protagonists and narrators is presented as a limitation of vision suggested by the limits of their experience, ambition, and power of expression. (159)

The narrator can never simply be identified with Naipaul, however similar their language and attitudes seem on the surface. Only a very shallow reading would interpret the two first person stories as representing their values straightforwardly through their narrators,[1] but in this story, with its seemingly detached narrator, more care must be taken to make the distinction. For example, the following passage is full of irony:

> And Bobby understood that the barboy was trying to start a conversation. It was what some young Africans did. They tried to start conversations with people they thought were visitors and kindly; they hoped not only to practise their English but also to acquire manners and knowledge. It moved Bobby to be singled out in this way; it moved him that, after all that had happened, the boy should show such trust; and it distressed him that he had allowed himself to be influenced by

> the colonel and had so far not looked at the boy, had seen only an African in uniform, one of the colonel’s employees, part of the hateful hotel. (190)

The reader does not need to be told that Bobby’s response to this boy is not disinterested. Bobby realises that he has a chance to take advantage of yet another young African’s desire for education and money, by paying for sexual favours; so his distress at not having ‘looked at the boy, seen only an African in uniform’ is not an objective statement on the state of Bobby’s mind, but another hint at his capacity, by now well known to the perceptive reader, for self-deception.

Words and phrases used by the narrator also reflect Bobby’s changeable attitude, for example, to Linda. When she holds up her shirt to display an insect bite, he sees ‘the thin yellow folds of the moist skin, the fragile ribs, the brassiere, put on for the day’s adventure, enclosing those poor little breasts’ (151), and he kisses the insect bite out of pity. Later, at dinner, irritated by her ‘casual feminine demand’ (175) that he investigate a mysterious presence in his own hotel room, he goes into her room and finds a ‘vaginal deodorant with an appalling name’ (176), which he uses to insult her the next day when the tension between them breaks into open conflict. The ‘poor little breasts’ and the ‘appalling name’ represent the extremes, of pity and fellow-feeling on one hand, and revulsion on the other, of his feelings towards Linda during their eventful journey, and the evaluative words, although not attributed to Bobby, are his words, not the narrator’s.

The relationship between Naipaul and the narrator of the Prologue and Epilogue is even more difficult to disentangle. They are both described as ‘from a journal’, but even Naipaul’s journals would hardly be so polished and

well-constructed in their original form. It is not important whether these incidents occurred. Their significance lies in the adoption of this particular Naipaul-like narrator – a 'reliable' voice – and the behaviour of the witnesses to these episodes of persecution. Both incidents are staged for the benefit of an audience, and once the audience loses interest, the persecution ceases. The title of the Epilogue, 'The Circus at Luxor', seems initially to refer to the Chinese circus, the members of which the narrator sees at Milan and then at Luxor; but the Egyptian with the whip is directly involved in providing a kind of circus entertainment for the visitors. The Chinese circus people, in contrast, are a model of civilised behaviour: 'so self-contained, so handsome and healthy, so silently content with one another: it was hard to think of them as sightseers' (245). Sightseers, 'travelling only for the sights' (8), it is implied, are apt to behave badly, and will demean others less powerful then themselves in order to engineer the 'sights' they wish to see, like the Italians at Luxor, and the Lebanese, Egyptian and Austrian travellers on the steamer to Alexandria in the Prologue, 'The Tramp at Piraeus'.

Both the incidents are described as games, with rules. The game on the steamer, in the Prologue, 'was to be like a tiger-hunt, where the bait is laid out and the hunter and the spectators watch from the security of a platform. ... Hans smiled and explained the rules of the game as often as he was asked' (15). The tramp is attacked, according to the rules of the game (of which presumably he has not been informed), but then he revenges himself by locking himself in the cabin he shares with his persecutors, denying them entry so they have to sleep in the dining room. But the game loses its interest, except as a tired, private joke; and when the tramp reappears to disembark at Alexandria,

'he was of less interest than he thought' (20). The other passengers have the last word by ignoring him.

The narrator's part in this episode is that of an observer, a first-hand witness, taking an anthropological interest in the proceedings. The narrator's character is only lightly sketched; he is disconcerted by the crowding on the steamer, and later, seeking solitude, comes upon the tramp, but 'I didn't disturb him. I feared to be involved with him' (12). Apart from these suggestions of a fastidious nature, we see the narrator only as a neutral observer of the other passengers and their diversions.

The narrator in the Epilogue is identifiably the 'I' of the Prologue, but is different in one respect: he does act, once. The game this time involves an Egyptian waiter at a tourist rest house using his camel-whip on the desert children: 'this was an Egyptian game with Egyptian rules' (242), played for the benefit of the Italian tourists who collaborate by continuing to bait the children with food scraps, and then by photographing the results, as Calder says, 'which figures the role of many modern artists, conniving in the creation of foulness which they then exploit' (483). Other tourists in the rest house take no notice, but the narrator is provoked into action:

> I saw that my hand was trembling. I put down the sandwich I was eating on the metal table; it was my last decision. Lucidity, and anxiety, came to me only when I was almost on the man with the camel-whip. I was shouting. I took the whip away, threw it on the sand. He was astonished, relieved. I said, 'I will report this to Cairo.' He was frightened; he began to plead in Arabic. The children were puzzled; they ran off a little way and stood up to watch. The two Italians, fingering cameras, looked quite calm behind their sunglasses. The women in the party leaned back in their chairs to consider me.
>
> I felt exposed, futile, and wanted only to be back at my table. (243-4)

Having acted, he expects 'some gesture, some sign of approval' from his Egyptian driver, but 'I couldn't tell what he thought. He was as correct as before, he looked as bored' (244).

Critical reactions to the narrator's intervention have ranged from Fawzia Mustafa's interpretation of it as a 'parable of despair' at the 'almost immediate erasure of the narrator's intervention' (119), to Morris's rather grandiose, 'seldom can we find a novelist so openly linking arms with his protagonists nor converting poetic justice into a current truth about the human condition' (104). Is it despair or solidarity, or perhaps both, that Naipaul is illustrating here? His final remarks put the whole book into context. The penultimate paragraph refers to an ancient Egyptian tomb painting depicting 'the pleasures of that life' (241), speculating on the purity of that time; but 'it was hard to believe that there had ever been such innocence' (246). Rob Nixon writes, 'Naipaul does not admit any remedial, purer realm outside the west in space or time and is unable to harbor dreams of an idealized organic society' (54), implying that this is a fault, but it is in fact a strength. Chauhan writes, of Naipaul's vision, 'its heartlessness is but the measure of Naipaul's honesty and of his artistic integrity. He deliberately refuses to hold out any sentimental salves' (22-23). Naipaul himself has said:

> in Africa you can get a profound refusal to acknowledge the realities of the situation; people just push aside the real problems as if they had all been settled. As though the whole history of human deficiencies was entirely explained by an interlude of oppression and prejudice, which have now been removed; any remaining criticism being merely recurrence of prejudice and therefore to be dismissed. (Rowe-Evans 26)

He sees colonialism as an example of a fundamental aspect of the human condition, rather than something which has occurred within the past few

centuries, which is now in its final stages, and after which the world will return to some 'purer realm'. Rothfork criticises him for refusing 'to accept the Marxist position that the corrupt colonial system must be destroyed. … Naipaul refuses to accept political solutions, even though he himself has described the political causes of injustice and tragedy in colonialism' (187). This is, in fact, Naipaul's point. Colonialism is unjust and has tragic consequences, but it does not follow that he should accept 'the Marxist position' that destroying it will immediately and automatically lead to Utopia, and he is 'not interested in attributing *fault*' (Michener 64). He sees the 'true forces of history' as 'dreams, lies, lusts, and rages' (Schiff 150), and these are decidedly not specific to any one civilisation. He explains his predilection for 'Western civilisation' to an interviewer:

> Growing up in Trinidad, Naipaul came to appreciate that beyond his rooted-in-the-past family and his little island, there was something broader, a 'universal civilization' based on individualism, personal responsibility and the right to pursue one's own vocation. While we loosely call this 'Western' civilization, it has that universal application that the older cultures lacked. ...
>
> While the universal civilization flourished in the West, it is not specifically European or Anglo-Saxon. Naipaul: 'We all in a way – even when we violate the rules – know that there are certain good ideas of public behavior. We can't torture people; people have human rights; people must have access to the rule of law. This is comparatively new to have these principles honored across the globe. (Morais)

And as to being prejudiced, he does not deny it. He says, 'for works to last, they must have a certain clear-sightedness. And to achieve that, one perhaps needs a few prejudices' (Hardwick 47). He will not, in a bogus attempt at objectivity, suppress his own point of view, and it has become more and more important to him, in the years since *In a Free State*, that his narrators are scrupulously himself.

The form of this work allows Naipaul to give a number of examples of 'casualties of freedom' (8) (as he describes Egyptian Greek refugees on the steamer) and they are not always the examples the reader might expect. He shows that the English are not immune to suffering from the new freedoms of the postcolonial world along with the Indians, Egyptians, West Indians and Africans of the nations they formerly subjected. The subjection, also, is only part of the story. He said, talking to Ian Hamilton in 1971,

> one of the things that struck me, and has struck me for many years, is that even at the height of imperial power, even when people make the most fantastic assumptions about their place in the world, they still have these enormous personal problems, problems that can make their power seem meaningless to them, make it merely the background to their own anguish. (20)

Reading these stories in sequence, one is reminded constantly of the variety of resonances in the word 'free' – and one realises that freedom is always relative, and freedom from one subjection will, almost inevitably, lead to another. Santosh, in Washington, is 'a free man';

> I could do anything I wanted. I could, if it were possible for me to turn back, go to the apartment and beg my old employer for forgiveness. I could if it were possible for me to become again what I once was, go to the police and say, 'I am an illegal immigrant here. Please deport me to Bombay.' I could run away, hang myself, surrender, confess, hide. It didn't matter what I did, because I was alone. And I didn't know what I wanted to do. It was like the time when I felt my senses revive and I wanted to go out and enjoy and I found there was nothing to enjoy. (54-5)

'Freedom' for Dayo's brother comes when he discovers Dayo is not studying but hanging aimlessly around London:

> I have nowhere to go and I walk now, like Dayo, where the tourists walk. The roti-shop: that noose I put my neck in. I think how nice it would be if I could just leave it, leave it just like that. Let the curry from yesterday go stale and rotten and turn red like poison, let the dust fall from the ceiling and settle. Take Dayo home before he get foolish …

> The life is over. I am like a man who is giving up. I come with nothing. I have nothing. I will leave with nothing.
>
> All afternoon as I walk I feel like a free man. I scorn everything I see, and when I tire myself out with walking, and the afternoon gone, I still scorn. I scorn the bus, the conductor, the street. (95-6)

It is this freedom – the feeling of release from all responsibilities – which gives him the courage and desperation to turn on his tormentors in the roti-shop, and leads to the greater bondage he is now subject to. And the 'free state' in the title story is full of captives – imprisoned by their 'liberal' beliefs, like Bobby, or their knee-jerk 'settler' attitudes, like Linda and the Colonel; or by the exigencies of civil conflict, like the Africans in their newly independent, 'liberated' states. Freedom as a political concept is virtually meaningless, as is its related term 'liberalism'; Naipaul's 'free state' is more dangerous, implying lostness, irresponsibility and desperation.

Hughes writes,

> his vision of disorder and decline has often been considered a kind of malice, especially by those subjects of past or passing empires, British or American, French or even Belgian, who have felt themselves mocked; or by believers who find themselves attacked as superstitious. But that overlooks the obsessed origins and literary development of his visions. (*V.S. Naipaul* 10-11)

In the next chapter, I consider a work which places in the foreground the process of Naipaul's construction of himself as a writer, precisely situated in his own historical and geographical surroundings.

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[1]Cudjoe, nevertheless, calls 'One out of Many' 'an intensely racist story', based on Santosh's attitudes to African Americans! (146).

Chapter Sixteen

A Definition of the Writing Self: *The Enigma of Arrival*

In an article published a year after finishing *The Enigma of Arrival*, a book in itself concerned in a large part with the process of its own creation, Naipaul refers to James Joyce's difficulty with the English language – his feeling that it did not belong to him. He goes on to say:

> the James Joyce point about language is not the one I am making. I never felt that problem with the English language – language as language. The point that worried me was one of vocabulary, of the differing meanings or associations of words. *Garden, house, plantation, gardener, estate*: these words mean one thing in England and mean something quite different to a man from Trinidad, an agricultural colony, a colony settled for the purpose of plantation agriculture. How, then, could I write honestly or fairly if the very words I used, with private meanings for me, were yet for the reader outside shot through with the associations of the older literature? I felt that truly to render what I saw, I had to define myself as writer or narrator; I had to reinterpret things … and after two years' work, I have just finished a book in which at last, as I think, I have managed to integrate this business of reinterpreting with my narrative.
>
> My aim was truth, truth to a particular experience, containing a definition of the writing self. ('On Being a Writer' 7)

Finding his own voice is only a part of this almost obsessive interest in language in this novel. Some of this interest is explicit, some is not, but the writing constantly draws attention to itself, in many different ways. The novel starts with literal obscurity: 'For the first four days it rained. I could hardly see where I was' (11). As his time in the valley passes, he learns to see where he is, to understand and interpret, visually and verbally, and the two modes are inextricably linked:

> I had slowly learned the names of shrubs and trees. That knowledge, helping me visually to disentangle one plant from another in a mass of vegetation, quickly becoming more than a knowledge of names, had added to my appreciation. It was like learning a language, after living among its sounds. (299-300)

When he first arrives at the cottage in Wiltshire, his attitude is still – at least in the hindsight of the rhetorical position of the novel – structured by his knowledge of English language and literature; his 'half-English half-education' (221). He knows facts about the meanings of geographical names that the local people would probably not know – words are 'shot through with associations of an older literature' that, in this case, he knows and they do not. He knows that '"avon" originally meant only river' (12) and 'that both elements of Waldenshaw – the name of the village and the manor in whose grounds I was – I knew that both "walden" and "shaw" meant wood' (13). But even his theoretical knowledge is incomplete: it takes some time before he is 'able to think of the flat wet fields with ditches as "water meadows" or "wet meadows", and the low smooth hills in the background, beyond the river, as "downs"' (11). This passage, from the second paragraph of the novel, gives prominence to Naipaul's preoccupation with language and the part it plays in perception which, together with change, decay, flux, death and the passage of time, are deep themes in this novel.

His urge to explain and clarify differences in the meaning of words, and also social concepts, is pervasive. A discussion of the words 'garden' and 'gardener', for example, occupy several pages in the novel, to explain why the Waldenshaw gardener, Pitton, 'wasn't my idea of a gardener' (203). A potted history of gardening in Trinidad follows, emphasising the low status of gardeners, an occupation for unskilled East Indians stranded in Trinidad after their periods of indentured labour had expired: 'the gardener belonged to the plantation or estate past' (205). Even his ideas of English gardeners, picked up from P.G. Wodehouse and Shakespeare, failed to prepare him for the reality of

Pitton, ‘the carefully dressed, paunchy, staid figure’, who ‘turned out to be only the gardener’ (206).

The very fact that words have different associations in different societies, something he was no doubt aware of when reading English books as a child, may have given Naipaul his abiding interest in words, etymologies, catachreses, local usages. He loves language; he delights in words, and his delight takes him beyond the mere urge to clarify possible misunderstandings. When he was mentally ill at Oxford in the early fifties, he says, ‘the only thing that gave me solace, which didn’t create pictures of human beings, was the intricacy of language. I lost myself in studies of the derivation of words, the design of the lettering’ (Michener 66-7). Some of the terms he introduces in *Enigma* are, no doubt, in common usage, like ‘water meadows’, but without any comment he calls the wide, flat way to Jack’s cottage which ‘would have been used for carts in the old days’ (13) the ‘droveway’, a term which does not appear in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: persistent research in the *Oxford English Dictionary* discovers that its last mentioned usage was in the Laws of Sewers, 1726. Whether in Wiltshire it is still in common use is not mentioned in the novel: none of the other characters uses the word, but then the novel does not contain very much dialogue. Another example is the word ‘accidia’, in the form Naipaul uses it. In the *Concise Oxford* it occurs as ‘acedia’ or ‘accidie’, and only in the *OED* is it listed as a headword in the original medieval Latin form which Naipaul uses. His use of the word for his landlord’s malaise, also, seems to be his own interpretation. He expresses his sorrow at Jack’s illness and impending death in an oddly linguistic way, as well: ‘His face was waxen. I knew the word, from books. But never till now,

seeing what it described on a white face, had I truly understood the word' (43). This has the effect of quietly reminding the reader of Naipaul's racial difference, the colour of his own face, the alien appearance of this erudite man, fully in control of the language of England, enjoying it and playing with its sounds and associations.

The delight he expresses when he learns a new usage could perhaps be seen as pedantry. His novel is peopled with Dogberries and Mrs Malaprops, and sometimes he does appear to be mocking them, affectionately, for their linguistic ineptitude. The language of these people – hard to think of them as fictional characters, although that is the correct way to view them – is as crucial to his portrayal of them as their dress and their habits and their behaviour *in extremis*. Pitton, especially, is unwittingly a mine of fascinating linguistic information, and is sometimes embarrassed by the narrator's interest in his expressions; in the 'new determinative use of the preposition "in"' in the phrase 'to pick the pears *in* – I liked that *in*. I played with it, repeated it' (60); and the 'tying' of the saw in the wet wood they were cutting together: 'I liked the word. I had never heard it before; but it was suggestive and felt right. Pitton became embarrassed' (238). Best of all, Naipaul loves the word 'refuge', meaning refuse or rubbish.

> Refuse, refuge: two separate, unrelated words. But 'refuge', which Pitton used for 'refuse', did in the most remarkable way contain both words. Pitton's 'refuge' not only stood for 'refuse'; but had the additional idea or association, not at all inappropriate, of asylum, sanctuary, hiding, almost hide-and-seek, of things kept decently out of sight and mind. (182)

He is further enchanted to find that the word is used in a similar way, to mean rubbish collection, by several others in the valley. (It is, in fact, a usage listed

in the *OED* as obsolete or dialectal.) Despite his idiosyncratic, or dialectal, usages and vocabulary, however, Pitton is 'without the gift of words. They [he and his wife] had trouble finding words for what they had to say, so it seemed that they had very little to say' (207). Bray, the car hire man, is different. He is a confident talker, with his own set of catachrestic usages: '"arrogant" was primarily Bray's version of "ignorant", but it also had the meaning of "arrogant", and this word, when used by Bray, with its two meanings and aggressive sound, was very strong' (217). And '"You know me," he would say. "I'm a down-and-out Tory." Running together "downright" and "out-and-out"' (221). Old Mr Phillips, a gentle, sociable man, talks of 'old wise tales' (267). These people, in the heart of the English countryside, use English just as idiosyncratically as the Trinidadians among whom Naipaul grew up, and cannot aspire to the correctness and depth of knowledge of this alien in their midst, despite his 'half-education'.

He is puzzled but sympathetic about people without 'the gift of words'. Much as he loves words himself, he is conscious of the dangers of a glib tongue: in *The Mimic Men* Sandra has 'the gift of the phrase', and it lets 'simple words harden into settled judgements and attitudes' (65), making life in the tiny society of Isabella unpleasant for herself and others. But to be entirely without this gift is unimaginable. The new dairyman and his wife arrive in the valley, from an unnamed 'rough time in a town somewhere':

> What terrors must there have been in the town for them! How could people like these, without words to put to their emotions and passions, manage? They could, at best, only suffer dumbly. Their pains and humiliations would work themselves out in their characters alone: like evil spirits possessing a body, so that the body itself might appear innocent of what it did. (36)

Often, though, those without the gift of words appear to greater advantage than those who use language confidently, like Bray, or the central heating contractor, Michael Allen, who was 'a great boaster … in the short time we spoke he boasted about many things, he asked me nothing about myself' (68). In contrast, the old farm workers, 'after the solitude of their tractor cabs and the downs, were invariably ready for a wave and a smile. It was the limit of communication; there was really nothing to add to the wave, the smile, the human acknowledgement' (31). Even when he meets Jack face to face, they 'looked at each other, examined each other, made noises rather than talked' (32). This is the way of the older generation of farm workers – few words or none, expressing much. Jack's father-in-law, upon his only meeting with the narrator, manages only three words: 'Dogs worry pheasants', but into that gnomic utterance, he imparts

> a little impulse of authority, even bullying, with someone who was a stranger. … But it was the briefest impulse in the old man; and perhaps it was also a social impulse, a wish to exchange words with someone new, a wish to add one more human being to the tally of human beings he had encountered. (26)

No such impulses are to be witnessed when the farm is modernised. The new farm workers, driving to the new 'milking parlour in brightly-coloured cars' (54) are 'tense young men, conscious of their style, their jeans and shirts, their moustaches and cars' (55), without the 'dumb friendliness' (57) of the old farm workers. When addressed, one of these young men 'seemed bemused … He mumbled something which I couldn't understand – all his style breaking down at this moment of speech' (56).

The semantics of the styles of dress, the vanities, of the characters is as revealing as their speech. He dwells in some detail on Bray's mode of dress as a car hire man: the various combinations of peaked cap and cardigan:

> A cardigan can be unbuttoned and buttoned in many ways; it can suggest formality, casualness, indifference … and the peaked cap – it could be set at many different angles: it could express regard or disregard … It would have been harder for him without the cap; he would have had to find words, set his face in different ways. … The peaked cap, with its many angles, together with the various ways of wearing the cardigan, enabled Bray to make (and make clear) a whole range of subtle judgements. (222-223)

But styles of dress, like those of Brenda and Les, can show a more damaging self-obsession, and the narrator sees in their self-conscious vanities the symptoms, if not the seeds, of their tragedy. Brenda returns from her brief affair with the central heating man, to Les, whom she taunts – 'and it was hard not to feel that she didn't have some idea of what she was provoking' (71) – into stabbing her to death. And here is a question which, once again, sets the narrator at a distance from the society he inhabits – his feeling that this passion does not befit people who are servants:

> It took some understanding, that people like Brenda and Les, who were so passionate, so concerned with their individuality, their style, the quality of their skin and hair, it took some understanding that people who were so proud and flaunting in one way should be prepared in another corner of their hearts or souls or minds to go down several notches and be servants. … Within that condition (which should have neutered them) all their passions were played out. (64)

A startling observation; it is, however, immediately qualified: 'But that might have been my own special prejudice, my own raw nerves. I came from a colony, once a plantation society, where servitude was a more desperate condition' (64). 'Servant' is another word he might have added to his list of words that 'mean something quite different to a man from Trinidad' ('On

Being a Writer'), and not only the word, but its application to the situation. The Phillipses and Les and Brenda would not use the word to describe themselves, although Bray shares the narrator's prejudice: 'his vocation was really to be a free man, not to be what his father had been, a man "in service", a servant' (219). For both men, this is a prejudice carried like a burden from a childhood hurt.

Sometimes the narrator's use of figurative language can be startling as well. He describes, for example, Jack's father-in-law's routine as 'animal-like': 'Like a rat, he seemed to have a "run"' (26); but just a few pages later he includes himself and others in his animal metaphor, describing 'the [farm] manager's run, almost circular …' which was 'also Jack's; and it was partly mine' (30). The detachment with which he describes others he here, and elsewhere from time to time, extends to his younger self.

Some of the people he describes are foreign to him in every way, and he observes them with a detached, if compassionate, interest. Others he has, to a greater or lesser extent, fellow-feelings for. He can enter into Bray's hurt about servitude in his past. The landlord also seems a kindred spirit:

> coming to the manor at a time of disappointment and wounding, I felt an immense sympathy for my landlord, who, starting at the other end of the world, now wished to hide, like me. I felt a kinship with him. … I never thought his seclusion strange. It was what I wanted for myself at that time. (174)

He compares stages of his own life with those of his landlord's, noting that 'in 1949 or 1950 – 1950 being the year I had left my own home island … my landlord had withdrawn from the world' (197). The landlord, too, is or was an artist of sorts, claiming a kinship with the narrator by sending copies of his poems and drawings as gifts, via Mrs Phillips, although they never actually

meet. More worrying to the narrator is Alan, the landlord's cousin, whom he gets to know well. Alan is in himself a cautionary tale – a warning of what can happen to an artist without the self-discipline, or drive, to produce work of any significance. He describes

> Alan the writer, the man with the childhood, the man with the sensibility. I understood this idea of the writer because it was so like my own when I had first come to England. … And that writer's personality of Alan's was partly genuine, and no more fraudulent than my own character, my idea of myself as a writer, had been in 1950. (259)

But Alan, unlike Naipaul, could produce

> no novel or autobiographical novel (setting the record straight, showing the truth behind the shiny bright clothes and the clowning manner); no critical study of contemporary literature (which he sometimes spoke about); no Isherwood-like book about post-war Germany, which he spoke about at other times. (259)

He lets it be known he is making notes: his love of language and idiosyncratic behaviour is like the narrator's. He reports with glee the landlord's use of the expression 'chafing dish' (262), and his entertaining Pitton the gardener with pink champagne. The narrator is touched by his flattery: 'It was hard, once Alan had told you he was making "notes" about you, to ignore him, hard not to start acting up (even like my landlord) to an intelligent, friendly man who might indeed be making notes about all the things you were saying' (262). Alan's speech is as flamboyant as his dress. He refers to the landlord's style as that of 'before the deluge', and sometimes refers to Mr Phillips (whom he usually calls Stan) as 'Phillips' in the old style as if he were a butler or a footman. But 'his literary approach to his experience, the self-regard that would have gone with its "frankness" (on approved topics, no doubt – homosexuality, masturbation, social climbing), perhaps hid the cause of his

incompleteness from himself' (260). One day Alan rings the narrator, after an absence of a year, in a drunken state:

> hardly able to control his words, he was seeking only to send messages of love, to flatter, to speak to me about my work.
>
> And he was asking nothing in return. For there was, as it were, no means of getting back to the person from whom all this issued. The person that wished to buy peace from the world was beyond the reach of the world, was hardly known, it might be said, to Alan himself. It didn't matter how much one flattered back; it didn't matter how much love one sent back, one could never touch the true person. (263-4)

The portrayal of Alan is the most poignant feature of a book filled with poignancy. Not long after this phone call, he takes an overdose of pills and dies. 'It was a theatrical kind of death. Theatre would not have been far from Alan's mind that evening' (265). Theatricality, or the feeling of being in a play or a film or a novel, forms a constant theme in Naipaul's description of his youth – the feeling that the world of literature is 'the real world' (119). Alan's tragedy is that he never manages, as Naipaul has managed, to discover himself, to enter the actual real world outside literature, despite his frankness on 'approved topics'.

His friendship with Alan is one of the most intimate relationships the narrator has with anyone in this novel, and this is a measure of the novel's unusual nature, which reads like a prose poem, or an essay, or an autobiographical memoir. Critics have difficulty with the categorisation of the book, some rejecting altogether its definition as a novel. Robert Royal, for example, in *National Review*, writes, 'the narrator's story is to all appearances a memoir of Naipaul's life' (50); and Cudjoe mounts a political attack: 'his studied act of refusal/defense in calling *The Enigma of Arrival* a novel can be described as nothing more than an attempt to deflect the painful consequences

of his decision: his inability to face up to the implications of his colonial origins' (215). Cudjoe's reading is very selective: the novel in several ways focuses directly on the very subject of his colonial origins. Naipaul himself says,

> if he had called it an autobiography … 'I think I would be run out of town, because there's no autobiography there – no family, no wife, no friends, no infidelities, nothing. That whole bit of life is torn out. There's nothing about me apart from my writing.'

He does not deny, though, that 'the writer, the observer, … is scrupulously myself. The minute other people are in the picture, that is where the fictive element comes in' (Gussow, 'Enigma'). In another interview, he said,

> I had to identify my narrator, my seeing eye, my feeling person. I didn't want to invent a character and give him a bogus adventure to set him there [in the English countryside]. I thought I should make the writer be myself – let that be true and within that set the fictional composite picture because you can't use real people to hang philosophical ideas about flux and change. (Niven 163)

So all the people of the novel, who seem to have such independent existences, are to be regarded as fictional. The characters are viewed from a distance: their actions, their comings and goings, their deaths and loves, all occur off-stage, as it were. The illusion of reality in this novel is, oddly, heightened by the scrupulous limitation of the narrator's point of view. Everything that he finds out about other characters comes to him either via his own observation and speculation, or as hearsay through one of his informants – Bray, Mrs Phillips, Alan, Jack's wife. The indeterminacy belongs to the narrator as well as the reader: any discussion of events outside his knowledge is clearly identified as speculation, like his contemplation of Brenda's murder:

> And it was hard not to feel that she didn't have some idea of what she was provoking. And how, having started on the job of destruction – he had used a kitchen knife – having started on that, from which very

> quickly there was no turning back, however much in a corner of his mind he might have been wishing it all undone, healed again, how he must have struck, until the madness and the life was over! All in that little thatched cottage with the ruined garden. (71)

Or his detailed imagining of the meeting between Bray and his 'fancy woman', in the setting of a 'bed-and-breakfast place … run by a man supplementing his poor income from his original business, a picture-framing-junkshop-antique shop' (277). The very expansive, digressive nature of the narrative is unlike a novel. People who hardly play a part in any action are described in some detail, like 'the neat, well-dressed, anxious man who came to deal with the plague of mice' (183), who is given a half a page, provides another example of the usage of the word 'refuge', and is never mentioned again – once again, his language being one of the most significant things about him. Brenda's sister, too, coming to 'collect Brenda's things' (72), is treated in the way a real person would be treated in a memoir of someone linguistically perceptive. She describes her father's wartime dealings with 'Ministry of Defence', and the narrator comments, 'I didn't think she was romancing. Her use of the words "Ministry of Defence" without the definite article – the *the* that the average person would have wanted to add; was convincing' (74). In a more conventional fiction, there would be no need for the narrator – or the author – to comment on the verisimilitude of the character's vocabulary. The novel is a brilliant piece of fictional writing in its convincing, because so incomplete, portrayals of people who seem utterly real, and the muted reportage of the events, major and minor, in their lives. It is ultimately unprofitable, however seductive it might be, to try to sift the fiction from the reality. It is certainly not the point of the novel.

Naipaul writes slowly, and instructs his audience to read slowly: 'You've got to rest after reading twenty good pages. You've got to stop and think. I read very slowly. It's very natural. My paragraphs are very rich – they have to be read. Many things are happening in the paragraph. If you miss a paragraph – if you miss a page – it's hard to get back into it' (Schiff 149). He denounces conscious style, smoothness, and rhythm in prose, believing that these attributes lead to 'the killing of sense' (Schiff 149). It is undeniable that there is a Naipaul style, although it varies from book to book; there is a dryness, a plainness, a hesitation to use adverbs, adjectives, or superlatives; there is sometimes a slightly unusual usage, or an archaic word; there is frequent repetition and echoing of words and phrases; and sometimes a ruminative exclamation. In *Enigma* there is a particular emphasis on repetition. Levy has written perceptively on the language of this work (in a way that sometimes echoes Naipaul's discussion of the language of his characters). She draws attention to the 'multiple effects' of the repetitions within a paragraph, and the use of repeated nouns where pronouns might be expected. To her, for one thing,

> they indicate a tendency towards a more concrete, and hence, in developmental terms, a more primitive level of expression. For another, they create a process of defamiliarization, a drawing attention to the sound of the word that creates a split between the apprehension of the objects and the language used. (111)

The repetitions give a rhetorical force – and, as he surely must realise, a rhythm – to the prose; but to break the trance this might produce in the reader, he will often digress in mid-sentence, referring to something distantly related to the theme in hand, which can result in very long, complex sentences. The effect is to slow down the reading, to force the reader to go back, let the sense sink in.

Often these digressions will refer to something already mentioned; occasionally they foreshadow something to come. He describes, for example, the gardens of the row of cottages of which Jack's forms part: 'Technically, the gardens were at the front of the cottages. In fact, by long use, the back of the cottages had become the front; and the front gardens had really become back gardens' (21). Thereafter, when he mentions Jack's garden, he will say, 'the garden at the front (or back) of his cottage' (31), or 'at the back of his cottage – the back being where the true front now was' (33), or 'the back (really the front)' (47). The roses that Mrs Phillips cut 'right back' (201) and which never bloomed again are mentioned several times, as are the various ways of storing hay from the different eras of the farm, and 'the ancient Roman villa at Chedworth in Gloucestershire' (242). These echoes contribute to the timeless, or cyclical, nature of the novel, especially the parts which describe the narrator's time in Wiltshire: 'Jack's Garden', 'Ivy', and 'Rooks'. Part Two, 'The Journey', and Part Five, 'The Ceremony of Farewell', are more chronologically linear, while the other parts, because of the echoing and foreshadowing, the tendency to dwell on one theme, or tell one person's story complete and then come back and tell another, have a nebulous or confused sense of time. This is in part a technique designed to emphasise considerations of the stages of human life: to see people as they change through time, rather than to show them as actors in dramatic events over which they have control. He meets the farm manager after his retirement, and is moved to contemplate: 'How quickly his time had passed! How quickly a man's time passed! So quickly, in fact, that it was possible within a normal span to witness, to comprehend, two or three active life-cycles in succession' (78). But although

he describes them when he describes the encounter, these thoughts come to him much later, he emphasises, after his time at the cottage and the manor is over, and 'middle age had come as abruptly to me as old age appeared to me to have come to the old manager' (78). The death of Jack is described early in the novel, but 'the way he had asserted, at the very end, the primacy not of what was beyond life, but life itself' (87) becomes emblematic, and his role as the inspiration for this novel is referred to, in classic self-referential, metafictional style, in the novel's final sentence.

The narrator's sense of history – where he is in his life, compared to other people and events, as well as the relation of his lifetime to the course of history – is constantly demonstrated by references to dates and inscriptions on buildings, and the rhetoric of architecture itself. He notices makers' names on the new barn, on the shop blinds in London in 1950, the 'ordinary little houses, two or three of which carried – their only fanciful touch – the elaborate monogram of the owner or builder or designer, with the date, which was, surprisingly, a date from the war: 1944' (14). He notes the sign outside Amesbury which 'celebrated the antiquity of the town: with a coat of arms and a date, 979 A.D' (50). He discusses the churches of the district: the Gothic church with 'a primitive painting of Doomsday' (270), the former Victorian Sunday School, the mission hut, the Wesleyan chapel, and the renovated church near the manor:

> This church was an age away from the religious anxiety of the Doomsday painting of St Thomas's in Salisbury: the sense of an arbitrary world, full of terrors, where men were naked and helpless and only God gave protection. The parish church had been renovated at the time the great Victorian houses and manors of the region were being built. And it was of that confident period: as much as a faith, it

> celebrated a culture, a national pride, a power, men very much in control of their destinies.
>
> … the very scantiness of the parish-church congregation … supported the idea of an enclosed, excluding cultural celebration. (271)

This ‘celebration’ has no room for ‘Jack, who celebrated life where he lived’ (272), or Mr Phillips or Bray (or, presumably, Naipaul himself). These people, whom he sees as English ‘types’ when he first comes to the manor, he can now see do not belong to the smug security of English country life. Even the Infirmary which he enters for the first time, when serious illness strikes, ten years after he arrives, is described, with its ‘elegant Georgian letters … stating the voluntary nature of the Infirmary and giving the date, 1767’ (298). Along with this attention to dates and buildings, and their place in history, he cultivates vagueness in quantifying his time at the manor cottage. It is clear that he spent ten years there, and that he arrived there about twenty years after his arrival in England in 1950. But within that stretch of years, time seems elastic, and although it may be possible to construct a chronology for the novel’s events during those ten years, the narrative deliberately discourages such attempts. It parallels the narrator’s difficulty dating events after the memorable first year:

> Time altered for me. At first, as in childhood, it had stretched. The first spring had contained so much that was clear and sharp – the moss rose, the single blue iris, the peonies under my window. I had waited for the year to repeat. Then memories began to be jumbled; time began to race; the years began to stack together; it began to be hard for me to date things. (269)

Distances are rarely given exactly, or even quantities: ‘two or three houses’ (14), the ‘very big silage pit’ (57), the ‘very wide’ droveway (26). In Part Five, this reluctance to date events disappears, and we are encouraged to put a time scale against events, starting with ‘a journalistic assignment … in August

1984' (309). Itineraries of the travels of Naipaul and his brother, taking them to and from Trinidad on the occasion of their sister's death, are given in some detail. With Part Five, the healing of the time in Wiltshire is completed, and it is time to re-enter the real world; not the 'real world' of literature, but the real world where close relatives die, where planes must be caught, arrangements made, schedules adhered to. The time in Wiltshire which is the true subject of the novel is to be considered whole, not broken down into quantities or time spans: just a magical decade of healing, for the narrator, and a procession of people to be observed, to exemplify 'philosophical ideas about flux and change' (Niven 163). His place in this world, which at the time he arrives seems 'perfection', he recognises, is a by-product of the empire, and cannot last, but he does not necessarily see this as a disadvantage to himself, compared to the 'privilege' of his landlord:

> Whatever my spiritual state at the moment of arrival, I knew I would have to save myself and look for health; I knew I would have to act at some time. His privilege – his house, his staff, his income, the acres he could look down at every day and know to be his – this privilege could press him down into himself, into non-doing and nullity. (175)

His idea of his landlord is valuable to him, and he is

> nervous of undoing the magic of the place. If I had seen my landlord, heard his voice, heard his conversation, seen his face and expression, been constrained to make conversation back, to be polite, the impression would have been ineffaceable. He would have been endowed with a 'character', with vanities, irritations, absurdities; and this would have led me to make judgements – the judgements that, undoing acceptance, can also undo a relationship. (175)

This distance is somehow contained in his failure ever to use his name, although the term he always uses, 'my landlord', has an oddly intimate, proprietary ring. It is, perhaps, that 'my landlord' in the novel is just that – the concept the narrator has of the man, which belongs to him alone, and which he

does not want to destroy by meeting and getting to know the real man in the manor. The narrator himself never reveals his own name. The letter from Angela, his 1950 boarding house friend, is addressed to 'Victor', because this was the English name she had given him when they first met, his 'Hindi or Sanskrit name [being] too hard for her' (159). Since the narrator is so little an actor in the Wiltshire sections of the narrative, it never happens that another character speaks his name in dialogue, although Pitton once, in Salisbury, 'came up behind me and called me by my name' (254). The assumption is there to be made, therefore, that the narrator can be identified with Naipaul himself – even without the external evidence he has given of this intention. His presence in the novel is pervasive, and this provides a context for his judgements. The overall effect is of an eye that sees without condemning, but judgements, discriminations, even criticism, are certainly not absent. It is more that, seeing so clearly the frame with which the narrative is surrounded, the angle from which the narrator is seeing, it is not possible for the reader to interpret his judgements as anything but provisional. For example, when Bray, the car-hire man, begins to talk of religion,

> it crept up on me, the talk. I wasn't aware of how seriously he was speaking when he spoke of the 'the good book'. I barely took it in, heard it simply as part of his chattering everyday irony. I sat beside him in his car, had a sideways glimpse of his peaked cap and the slope and slit of his eyes, eyes squinting at the road. The squint-and-slit, the set of his face, and what I knew of his temperament led me to feel that he was joking. … As soon as I understood that he was speaking in earnest, my vision of him changed. In the same features, the same way of speaking, I saw not the glibness of his cynicism but personal feeling and, soon, passion. (272)

The narrator, also, makes these judgements only in the sense that he measures people's behaviour against his own explicitly personal, idiosyncratic value

system, then attempts to understand, compassionately, with a deep acceptance, how those values differ. In describing his relations with other characters in the novel the narrator is detached, an observer rather than an actor, even when he is personally involved. One friendship ends when Pitton, have lost his job as gardener at the manor, manages after a difficult period to begin a new life in Salisbury:

> Pitton, in this last decade of active life, grew out of what he had been. He got to know more people, at work, and on the council estate where he lived. Where he had feared anonymity, he found community and a little strength. … Gradually he stopped acknowledging me from the laundry van. One day in Salisbury, in that pedestrian shopping street where he had tried to fill me with his own panic, one day he saw me. And then – the new man – he didn't 'see' me. (255)

There is no reference to the pain this snub may have given to the narrator; the context is wholly that of Pitton's recovery from a difficult period, his becoming a 'new man'.

The Enigma of Arrival is about flux and decay, change, life cycles, and death; but it is also a meditation, an exercise, even a treatise, on language. Everything about it is artful, and our attention is constantly drawn to the fact. Flouting Iser's theory that 'the literary text is characterized by the fact that it does not state its intention' ('Indeterminacy' 43), Naipaul is happy to trace the development of his novel in Part 5:

> I had thought for years about a book like *The Enigma of Arrival*. … The fantasy and the ancient-world setting had been dropped. The story had becomes more personal: my journey, the writer's journey, the writer defined by his writing discoveries, his ways of seeing, rather than by his personal adventures, writer and man separating at the beginning of the journey and coming together again in a second life just before the end.
>
> My theme, the narrative to carry it, my characters – for some years I felt they were sitting on my shoulder, waiting to declare themselves and to possess me. But it was only out of this new

> awareness of death that I began at last to write. Death was the motif; it had perhaps been the motif all along. (309)

Death is not an oppressive motif, but one which shows ‘life and man as the mystery’ (318), typified by the narrator’s imputation to Jack of an assertion, ‘at the very end, the primacy not of what was beyond life, but life itself’ (87). Perhaps for Jack – with his ‘intellectual backwardness, his purely physical nature’ (211) – wordless happiness is possible, but for Naipaul, the joy of words is fundamental. Talking of his father, he said,

> he was unhappy much of the time. But he had a tremendous gift for joy which I share. Happiness is a kind of passive animal state, isn’t it? Whereas joy is a positive sensation of delight in a particular thing – a joke, another person, a meal – and you can have it in the middle of deep gloom. (Michener 66)

In his best writing, whatever its subject, delight in words and language is one of Naipaul’s most attractive characteristics. He describes how, when writing *A House for Mr Biswas*, ‘the right words seemed to dance above my head; I plucked them down at will’ (‘Writing *A House for Mr Biswas*’ 23), and a similar assurance and ease characterises *The Enigma of Arrival. Memento mori* this book may be, but its gloom is suffused with the unquenchable joy in words that Naipaul evinces on every page; ‘that reawakened delight in language’ (310) which came with the acknowledgement of the experience which prompted the writing of the book. But the narrator of *Enigma*, who seems so transparently the author, is, of course, a creature made only of language. Hughes notes that ‘Naipaul’s “writing self” is a created or self-fashioned figure, and as such is in great part already deconstructed. This self is at once the origin of autobiographical discourse *and* the target of its referential

use of language' ('Tropics of Candor' 210). John Bayley, in his review of the novel, also perceives a duality:

> To such a writer as Naipaul, for the purpose of understanding himself and others, and for the purposes of fiction, it is clearly necessary to have a deep and imaginative sense of the dual nature of individuals, their existence in two worlds, both in different ways precarious. Naipaul thoroughly understands the romance of himself … the inner saga of himself and his destiny which each person secretly carries alongside the physical circumstances of his existence. His own sense of himself comes out in this book with a gentle, meticulous candor, wholly absorbing and illuminating. (3)

And putting this self in the foreground, focalising the narrative almost pedantically through it, is an ethical strategy designed to provide the context for his own vision. As Peggy Nightingale says,

> the goal of all Naipaul's writing, which arises from his personal need to explain his own dislocation and to triumph over its debilitating effects, is to order experience in such a way that readers discern the elements of fantasy which distort perception and understanding; (237)

and it is in *The Enigma of Arrival* that he has most perfectly achieved this goal. John Bayley says, 'no other writer today could produce anything like it' (3), and this is not an empty truism but a recognition of the very essence of this novel.

Chapter Seventeen

V.S. Naipaul: Conclusion

Good writing, according to Naipaul, should be unexpected, unstable, and not entirely respectable. It must have a moral sense, while avoiding political and social simplifications, but should be fun to read. Above all, it should show the writer's 'whole response to the world' (Rowe-Evans 29) honestly and with clarity, not hiding behind a false persona or consciously beautiful prose; and the content should be matched by the form which expresses it most clearly, without any regard for formal categories such as 'novel' or 'essay'. The extent to which he has succeeded can be seen in a comment like that of Nan Doerksen: 'perhaps where Naipaul's genius lies in his ability to take an existing literary genre, or idea, and bend it to his own peculiar vision, finally creating something that is definitively his own as Shakespeare did' (113).

Naipaul has retold the narrative of his own career many times: the early difficulties, the breakthroughs, the disappointments, the times of healing, the journeys and arrivals, the fear and the panic which have compelled him to keep going. His life as a writer has become his subject, and the writing self has become foregrounded to the extent that there is now no doubt that one is reading a subjective view of the world, sometimes tactless, never free from prejudice, but always candid and unblinking: the view of 'an extraordinarily sensitive and extraordinarily self-conscious man who has chosen to travel through the chaotic, cruel, and yet elusive territory of darkness with the hope that he might, at some future time, triumph over it' (Padhi 465); abraded by the world into creating patterns in his writing to explain it. Hughes notes that 'the

reversion to overgrown and savage life of what was once trained and tamed has a special horror for Naipaul' (*V.S. Naipaul* 22): in *The Enigma of Arrival* he says he overcomes this horror by 'meeting distress half-way' and holding 'on to the idea of a world in flux' (53).

The need he has felt to make his own career and find the forms which best express 'the material that possesses' him (Burn 4) means that, despite a lack of overt 'structural deformations' (Hardwick 46), his work has always been idiosyncratic and has become more so throughout his career. The form of the early works is basically that of the novel or short story, but even so, *Miguel Street*, the first work he was able to sell for publication, was not published straight away because 'the publisher required something less unconventional in form first, something more recognizable by the trade as a novel' (*A Way in the World* 88). It is a series of linked short stories about characters living in a Port of Spain street, based on his childhood observations. The narrator is a boy who does well at school and in the end leaves Trinidad to study overseas; he is thus the prototype for a long line of Naipaul-like narrators which resumed, first with his travel writing, and later with parts of *In a Free State*, and came to full novelistic realisation in *The Enigma of Arrival.* In the early books it is not so much the form but the vision that is unique; the vision which never romanticises its subjects and finds in them a source of spontaneous comedy. His writing is certainly unexpected, and in unexpected ways. In *A House for Mr Biswas* he deliberately resists surprise and suspense in the narrative line, sketching the broad lines of Mr Biswas' life in the first few pages of the novel, and beginning Part Two with the statement: 'To the city of Port of Spain, where with one short break he was to spend the rest of his life, and where at

Sikkim Street he was to die fifteen years later, Mr Biswas came by accident' (307). The unexpectedness resides in observations of relations between characters, such as the unsentimental but eventually respectful partnership of Mr Biswas and Shama, or the changed dynamics of the marriage of Chinta and Govind when the wife-beating began: 'Her beatings gave Chinta a matriarchal dignity and, curiously, gained her a respect she had never had before' (461); or in Mr Biswas' own idiosyncratic characterisations. He has the impression, for example, whenever he sees his cousin Jagdat, that he 'had just come from a funeral'. Sober, or tearful, or weighed down with grief, the reader might presume, but it continues:

> Not only was his manner breezy; there was also his dress, which had never varied for many years: black shoes, black socks, dark blue serge trousers with a black leather belt, white shirt cuffs turned up above the wrist, and a gaudy tie: so that it seemed he had come back from a funeral, taken off his coat, undone his cuffs, replaced his black tie, and was generally making up for an afternoon of solemnity. (249)

This passage perfectly exemplifies Christopher Hope's observation (quoted by Mel Gussow) that 'his writing is always unexpected, and it's never entirely respectable' ('V.S. Naipaul' 29). It is not events that are unexpected, it is the reactions to them, the impulse to look below the surface to something that lies beneath, refusing to be content with political or social analyses which encourage simple answers. As his career progressed, Naipaul started to incorporate some of the unexpectedness into the form of his books. *In a Free State*, the first of his fictions to make clear formal innovations while still being called a novel, is in five sections, the central three not linked to the Prologue and Epilogue or each other by any continuities of character or setting; and the beginning of each part gives the reader a slight, unexpected jolt. *The Enigma of Arrival* once again has unexpectedness embedded in the narrative, in the

characterisations and observations, but also in its form and its denial of the reader's expectations of something resembling a plot. Naipaul is, in his distrust of plots, an example of Brooks' point about twentieth century writers' 'pervasive suspicion that plot falsifies more subtle kinds of inter-connectedness', but if plot is, as Brooks has defined it, 'a structuring operation deployed by narratives, or activated in the reading of narratives: … the logic and syntax of those meanings that develop only through sequence and succession', then it follows that Naipaul, like all writers, 'cannot ultimately do without plotting insofar as [their novels] remain narrative structures that signify' (113). Naipaul does his best to dispense with the mechanics of plot in *Enigma*, by blurring time and thus causing uncertainty in the logic of cause and effect which is basic to plotting, but he cannot avoid the emergence of plots from his narrative: the story of Brenda and Les, for example, becomes a small plot in the reader's mind; how they come to live in the valley, become friendly with the Phillipses at the manor, enjoy a brief happy period which ends when Brenda runs away to Italy with the central heating man, who 'kicked her out', and on her return she taunts Les into killing her with a kitchen knife. Details are filled in later, of a phone message for Les from Brenda in Italy which was not passed on, the kind of petty accident which has large and unexpected effects, and which normal plots thrive on. The difference is that it is filtered through Naipaul's mind – we only find out about each fact when he has learned it. But the reader is invited to reconstruct the *fabula*, as in all narrative, from the *syuzhet* constructed by the narrator from what he perceives. It is the point of view which makes *Enigma* an unusual book, rather than the lack of plot.

The need Naipaul has felt throughout his career ‘to make a pattern of one’s observations’ (Rowe-Evans 31) has led him to become an increasingly autobiographical writer. This can make him seem quite obsessed with various aspects of his life, particularly his writing career. He explains this impression when describing the origins of *The Enigma of Arrival*, from the period when his manuscript for *The Loss of Eldorado* was rejected, and he had to return to England and start again:

> It was out of this grief, too deep for tears or rage … that I began to write my African story, which had come to me as a wisp of an idea in Africa three or four years before.
>
> The African fear with which as a writer I was living day after day; the unknown Wiltshire; the cruelty of this return to England, the dread of a second failure; the mental fatigue. All of this, rolled into one, was what lay on the spirit of the man who went on the walks down to Jack’s cottage and past it. Not an observer merely, a man removed; but a man played on, worked on, by many things.
>
> And it was out of that burden of emotions that there had come to the writer, as release, as an idyll, the ship story, the antique-quayside story, suggested by ‘The Enigma of Arrival’;[1] an idea that came innocently, without the writer suspecting how much of his life, how many aspects of his life, that remote story … carried. But that is why certain stories or incidents suggest themselves to writers, or make an impression on them; that is why writers can appear to have obsessions. (*Enigma* 95-6)

He believes, as a writer, that he cannot avoid revealing himself and his preoccupations: this being so, the pretence of disinterest and objectivity is of no value and must be abandoned. As Padhi says,

> it is only by easing himself into his problem – in Naipaul’s case, it is basically one of a deep-seated feeling of homelessness, an ominous sense of incompletion at every level of human life and every point of human history – that the novelist can responsibly pursue his vocation and, at the same time, allow his sensibility to shine through his words. (464)

This has led him to what might seem the extreme of making his narrative persona, in his later work, indistinguishable from himself. However, in earlier works in which he used a third person narrator, or a fictional first person, there

was no impression of fraudulence. *A House for Mr Biswas* works superbly as a third person narrative, with the control of distance perfectly adjusted to keep the reader sympathetic but not uncritical of the main characters. *In a Free State* contains a mixture of narrative styles; and the two stories which are written in the fictional first person have an impact which could not be achieved in any other form. It is obvious that this is not the undisguised voice of Naipaul, but that does not prevent the reader from being convinced that the sensibilities dramatised in these stories are authentic. In reviewing the story 'In a Free State', Calder complains that, having 'lived for three years in East Africa' he 'can see how Naipaul … has squeezed more intensity out this arena than can actually be found there' (483) – precisely the point, surely, of writing imaginative fiction. However, his move towards an autobiographical narrator has precluded this type of fiction, since he remains reticent about areas of his life he would regard as private, such as his marriages and close friendships; and in his narrative persona, he cannot plausibly allow himself to indulge in the imaginative reconstruction of even fictional events. What this technique does achieve is that it makes explicit the framework of his judgements, and shows clearly that these judgements, whether expressed or implied, are his alone, not the decrees of a super-human being.

'Compassion,' he claims, 'is a political word' which 'I take care not to use' (Robinson 111). However, with its slight connotation of distance, it seems a more accurate term for his relation to many of the characters in his mature work than its Greek cognate, 'sympathy', while 'pity' is too condescending. In *A House for Mr Biswas* there is certainly sympathy, and sometimes empathy, for Biswas and his children – and here is an example, too, of a subjective view

which is prejudiced in order to see more clearly. It could be said that Shama, for example, could have been portrayed as more of a person in her own right: perhaps this was the motive behind Shiva Naipaul's novel *Fireflies*, which tells the life story of a woman in some ways similar to their mother, in the same way his brother's novel celebrates their father. But each novel makes its choice of where its sympathies will lie, and having done so, to retain clarity, must keep faith with its own vision. Mr Biswas is never presented as a moral paragon, and the negative attitudes to Shama are clearly his subjective views, even though they are narrated in the third person. *In a Free State* takes another step towards empathy, in the two shorter stories written in the first person. Moral judgement is held in abeyance in these stories: clearly no reader is expected to agree with Santosh in his views on black Americans, or with the attitude of Dayo's brother to 'the schoolgirls sitting young and indecent on the concrete kerb in their short blue skirts, laughing and talking loud to get people to look at them' (95); but neither are the narrators judged for their beliefs and actions. These stories make it possible for the reader, temporarily, to empathise, genuinely to feel with, their narrators, to see English and American society from an unfamiliar point of view. With *The Enigma of Arrival*, the empathy ceases. Naipaul's persona does not demand empathy for itself, and the most appropriate term for his attitude to the characters in the novel is compassion; in which is encompassed tolerance, understanding and a detached fascination with their affairs and way of life. In *Enigma*, everyone is interesting, and this fact is one of the things Naipaul discovers in the course of the novel, coming to realise what he failed to notice during his early years in London – displaced people from Europe, elderly people with memories of the previous century – thus

wasting valuable 'material'. He does not withhold judgement on his characters in the later work, but he makes it clear that his judgements are provisional, and they are always tempered by his tendency to see through the eyes of others. 'I could meet dreadful people and end up seeing the world through their eyes, seeing their frailties, their needs,' he said to Mel Gussow in 1987 ('Enigma'). There is a more important truth about people than a political or economic view: as he said to Ian Hamilton, 'even when people make the most fantastic assumptions about their place in the world, they still have these enormous personal problems' (20).

It is a feature of the unexpectedness of his books that they constantly dramatise this kind of contradiction: the rich landlord driven into himself by his wealth in *Enigma*, the English expatriates caught in the aftermath of independence in 'In a Free State', Santosh, prosperous but bereft in 'One out of Many'. It is insight into these apparently atypical situations, and exploration of personal relations which do not conform to narrative stereotypes – the refusal to romanticise or sentimentalise – which gives his writing its power to surprise, sometimes to shock, at other times delight. Hughes notes that at times his 'poise and concision seem to contradict the disorder that is their argument' (*V.S. Naipaul* 19): the contradictions pervade style and form as well as content.

A House for Mr Biswas is a comic novel. It is more, but that fact is undeniable. Most critics feel that after *Biswas* Naipaul abandoned comedy. Langran declares that 'the comic mode has no place' in the 'new vision' of *In a Free State* (135), and Pritchard believes that 'even admirers of' the novels of the 1970s 'might admit that they're not much fun to read' ('Naipaul' 594). However, Naipaul says,

> I think there is a good deal of comedy right through the work, a good deal of humour. It is contained in the actual tone of the writing, which probably comes over best during one's reading of it. I write for the voice. … the early comedy was really hysteria, the hysteria of someone who was worried about his place as a writer and his place in the world. When one is stressed one makes a lot of jokes. … That's not healthy. The profounder comedy comes from greater security. (Niven 164)

Describing a very early unpublished story in *A Way in the World,* he says, in criticism, that the humour depended 'more on words than on observation or true feeling' (27). Cleverness with words, facile wit, 'the gift of the phrase' which Sandra has in *The Mimic Men* (65), needed to be unlearned, in favour of 'plain concrete statements, adding meaning to meaning in simple stages' (*A Way in the World* 87), before he could begin to make his way as a writer. It would, of course, be fascinating to read some of his early unpublished fiction to see whether it was as unpromising and pretentious as he would have us believe: but certainly the style which he has developed by the avowed means of resisting style, rhythm, and poetry, has proved a very flexible and powerful instrument for him. As for humour, it does appear to have receded in the period between *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Enigma of Arrival*, but I observed, when giving a seminar paper on *In A Free State*, that quotations from the title story several times raised unexpected laughter from my listeners: the humour is embedded in the ironies of the situations characters have found themselves in, in their vanities and hypocrisies, and these are sketched economically in a few words which are easy to miss in silent reading. The dialogue, too, when spoken, betrays the characters' comical attempts at self-promotion and self-defence.

Political ideologies have never attracted Naipaul. His distrust of 'the corruption of causes' (*Area of Darkness* 188) and the mind-numbing

propensities of political commitment is well-known, but he feels, too, that a political world view would have seriously hampered him at the start of his career. In *A Way in the World* he describes his feelings upon reading a (fictional) article about his early work by a (fictional) West Indian revolutionary figure:

> I had never read that kind of political literary criticism before. I was glad that I hadn't. Because if I had, I mightn't have been able to write what I had written. … I would have known too much before I had begun to write, and there would have been less to discover with the actual writing. (110)

Soviet writers, he says, 'write most often about what is constant', whereas 'I much prefer writers who can carry in their writing some sense of what is, wasn't always, has been made, and is about to change again and become something else' (Mukherjee and Boyers 82). There is rarely a feeling at the end of a Naipaul novel of 'a state of normality … devoid of interest, energy, and the possibility for narration' which Brooks believes is the usual post-narrative state in the conventional nineteenth century novel (139): struggles as difficult as his, or worse, may be in store for Mr Biswas' widow and her children after his death; Bobby's troubles are only beginning at the end of 'In a Free State'; and even in *The Enigma of Arrival*, the narrator seems to be bracing himself for a new future away from the serenity of his 'house in the woods'. Ideas of flux, decay, renewal, exchange are constant themes in both his fiction and his non-fiction.

The texture of his prose has become denser with the years, but it is not the density of difficulty. By the time of *A Bend in the River*, his chapters, or parts, are quite long, but within each chapter there are many breaks, where the reader is invited stop and think and rest. This is what makes this novel, which

is less than 300 pages, seem longer than it is. It was the last of his books which could be unambiguously called a novel; since then there are been several travel books and two works of fiction, mingled with autobiography and history. The compulsion which characterises the reading experience for most novels of a more conventional kind is deliberately resisted by Naipaul. He writes, as he says, to try and slow the reader down, and the new style of fiction which he has developed is designed with this purpose. The machinery of plot has been subdued in favour of an implicit demand to ponder the significance of what he has written. Factual indeterminacy plays its part: in *A Way in the World*, for example, the fictional character Foster Morris, an ageing author, is the subject of a discussion between Naipaul and Graham Greene. Did the discussion take place, but about someone different; did Naipaul ever talk to Greene; is the whole situation utterly imaginary, or is there a grain of truth? Through this kind of factual indeterminacy, the reader is led to consider larger philosophical questions of the relationship between fiction and history. According to Hughes,

> Naipaul's vision of the world … depends upon its power to translate one history or story into others, to show that the relation between fiction and history is not the difference between falsehood and truth, but rather a distinction between converging narratives with different origins. (*V.S. Naipaul* 24)

When his work is measured against his own stipulations for good writing, he has largely succeeded. He is a very self-aware writer, very conscious of his purpose, which is to be as true to his vision of the world as he can be. The form he has developed with *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World* is an adaptation peculiarly his own, meeting his own needs as an author, but not what he would recommend to any other writer: his advice is that

every writer must ‘find the correct form’ for the ‘material that possesses you … the one that feels true to you’ (Burn 4). Pritchard finds that his novels of the 1970s are ‘not much fun’: what Naipaul calls ‘the element of pleasure’ which ‘is almost inevitably paramount’ (Mukherjee and Boyers 92) in the reading of fiction, has been played down, but it revives with *The Enigma of Arrival*, where a subdued joy, in words, in characters, in the natural world and human history, mingles easily with an unsentimental poignancy and a philosophical melancholy. The moral sense which literature ‘must have’ (Michener 69) is never lacking, although the vision has become broader and more tolerant as he has matured. He claims never to have been a satirist, and that ‘laughing at people ... would be bad manners and pointless writing’ (Walcott, ‘Interview’ 8). The most obvious candidates to be labeled satire are his two first published novels, *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, of which the first perhaps may be excused, because of its genial and ironic attitude to its protagonist. Whether or not the early novels are categorised in that way, however, the satirical impulse has long been replaced by a broader view, where ‘the most dreadful people’ can be understood, even while they are, provisionally, judged.

Fellow West Indian writers will perhaps never be happy with Naipaul: George Lamming attacked him in 1962 for producing ‘castrated satire; and although satire may be a useful element in fiction, no important work ... can rest safely on satire alone. … it is too small a refuge for a writer who wishes to be taken seriously’ (225); Derek Walcott, in his review of *The Enigma of Arrival*, despite his admiration of ‘our finest writer of the English sentence’ abhors his ‘author’s lie’, objecting to the fact that he prefers the heat and light

of New York to that of Trinidad ('Garden Path' 29). Stella Swain, in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, however, notes that 'his postcolonialism should be understood in the widest sense'; he is 'not so much the voice of any particular newly independent or decolonized nation as … the chronicler of diverse global experiences of alienation and loss', and, as P.S. Chauhan observes,

> His critics, confining themselves to a biographical perspective or to occasional ideological forays, get into high dudgeon because Naipaul would not engage in either formulaic denunciations of the colonial masters or the self-righteous praise of the land of his ancestors, the two favorite tacks of colonial writers. An open reading of Naipaul's work would suggest that if his critics, instead of imposing their expectations upon it, related his individual statements to the unifying philosophic outlook that underlies his writing, they might recognize that his work carries a more devastating judgment upon the dreams and deeds of the colonizer than would any wholesale ritualistic denunciation. (Chauhan 13-14)

Naipaul makes no apology for his views: they are his principal subject, and they are formed through the process of writing, which means that everything he writes is part of a progression towards understanding, rather than an exposition of views already held. His resistance to plots and the apparatus of fiction is important in this respect: plot, as he sees it, 'assumes that the world has been explored and now this thing, plot, has to be added on. Whereas I am still exploring the world. And there is narrative there, in every exploration' (Schiff 148). The narrative of this exploration, since *Finding the Centre* at least, has been his subject: his determination to face unpleasant truths unflinchingly, despite his fastidiousness, and his horror of mess and noise, causes the 'creative abrasion' (*Enigma* 254) which keeps him writing and prevents him

from succumbing to the temptations of idleness, which, however, tempting, represents ‘death of the soul’ (*Enigma* 254).

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[1]A painting by Giorgio de Chirico.

Comparison and Conclusion: Courage and Truthfulness

The quest for truth in fiction is the most important preoccupation these three authors share, along with their colleagues and predecessors throughout the novel's history. Murdoch said, 'the concept to hang on to is truth. Let justice look after itself' (Hartill 86); Lessing, when writing her autobiography, reread *The Golden Notebook* and concluded 'there is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth' (*Under* 314); and Naipaul said that his intention in writing *A House for Mr Biswas* was 'to achieve a novel "indistinguishable from truth"' (Michener 68). Their approaches to this oxymoronic quest, however, are all different, and the works they have produced in its pursuit are broad-ranging and diverse, the variety manifesting itself not only between the three authors, but within the career of each.

It is interesting to note the extent to which these three authors have followed parallel paths without intersecting. They all live in the south of England, they are of a similar generation of writers: although Naipaul is thirteen years younger than the others, they all published their first novels between 1950 and 1957; but they have had little to say about each other, or indeed, in the case of Naipaul and Murdoch, about any of their contemporaries. Naipaul mentioned Lessing as one of his contemporaries about whom there was 'some element of discussion' (Blandford 51) while he himself was ignored, without volunteering an opinion of her work, while Lessing told Joyce Carol Oates that although she agreed Naipaul was an 'excellent writer … somehow I don't feel the rapport with him, the kind of sympathy I feel for someone like Vonnegut' ('One Keeps Going' 39). She has been more generous about Murdoch, whom she mentioned in *Walking in the Shade* in

comparison with Jack Lindsay, who wrote ‘fanciful, whimsical novels, like Iris Murdoch, but nothing like as good’ (83); and who, she told an interviewer, was ‘unique, surely – not at all like any other English writer’ (Hale 180). Murdoch is commonly at a loss when asked about her contemporaries, and has made no comments I have discovered about either Lessing or Naipaul. Not only have they failed to make much impact on each other, but there is also an odd lack of critical comparison of the three. Lessing and Murdoch are sometimes discussed within the same book or article, as they both come into the category of ‘woman writer’, however little they would wish to be labelled thus, and Lessing and Naipaul, similarly, are both dealt with by post-colonial critics. It is surprising, though, that these three writers, who have all been prolific and well-reviewed on the whole, who have all won their share of the major literary prizes and honours, and who have received roughly equivalent amounts of critical attention, are rarely to be found under discussion together in any one forum. Because Naipaul is seen as a writer from Trinidad rather than a part of the British tradition, he is often left out of mainstream surveys of the modern British novel which include Lessing and Murdoch despite the fact that a critic like James Wood names him as ‘the only really important novelist working in England’ between 1950 and 1980 (‘Martin Amis’ 186).

This kind of categorisation – either as a ‘woman writer’ or a ‘post-colonial writer’ – is understandably unwelcome to an artist, but the problem is to an extent compounded by the material each of them chooses to write about. All writers are limited in the subjects they can choose, since their themes must arise out of a deep personal knowledge and experience, not out of a wish, like that Doris Lessing expressed in 1969, to write about ‘Chinese peasants’ or ‘the

Algerians in the FLN' (Raskin 15): however passionately they might feel about various causes, without a profound understanding of what lies behind the political and social aspects of other people's lives, writing about them will necessarily be essentially false and therefore of no value. Iris Murdoch's characters, therefore, however much she, and her critics, might deplore the fact, are principally drawn from the educated middle class in England, and many of her characters are civil servants, although they are not all, by any means, materially secure: the pressures of poverty are very real to many of her characters, for example, Tim and Daisy in *Nuns and Soldiers*, Emily in *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*, Tallis in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat.* The fact that these people are like herself and the people she knows in their social environment and circumstances does not mean that they are similar to her in other ways. Her philosophical creed makes her attempt to respect the inexorable necessities of life in her novels; and although she has not always succeeded in making her characters fully rounded, and they are often driven by similar demons, she has created during her career a diverse range of characters.

Her subject matter has certainly never been as varied as Lessing's, who, starting with the stories and novels set in Africa, has ranged to realistic fiction set in London, among refugees, revolutionaries and intellectuals, and inter-galactic and futuristic fantasies. In the process she has picked up many labels:

> first I was a "color-bar" writer … then it changed and I was a Communist writer. … Then there was a whole string of things that I've been – one of them was feminist. ... Then there was the Sufi label … oh yes, then mysticism. And now it's the space-fiction label. (Gray 119)

This constant shift of focus may come from an urge, perhaps not fully understood or admitted, to express social and political views in her fiction, and

trying to solve the inevitable problems this entails by changing the settings of her novels and using different perspectives, from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic. The tension in her writing between these extremes, between recognising the value of individuals and feeling the necessity of their submitting to the greater good of the community, the planet, or the universe; between a consciousness of the uniqueness and particularity of people and the belief that all experience is shared – these tensions have driven her to seek solutions in many different genres. However, although there have been some marvellous results along the way, she cannot reconcile the irreconcilable.

Naipaul's creative tension lies elsewhere. It is perhaps most fruitful when his naturally fastidious nature is constrained by his passion for accuracy and truth to examine closely what he is most distressed by; or when his instinct to withdraw from experience is combated by his fear of extinction – a fear which is only compounded by the fact that extinction is itself a consoling idea for him. He dramatised this tension most clearly in *A House for Mr Biswas*: although the character Mr Biswas was based on 'someone like' his father, he was in many ways tormented by Naipaul's own form of mental anguish, probably transmitted from father to son: the recently published letters between them while Naipaul was at Oxford in the early 1950s show a close identification between them; in fact, in a letter to his sister in 1951, Naipaul wrote:

> as I grow older, I find myself doing things that remind me of Pa, more and more. The way I smoke; the way I sit; the way I stroke my unshaved chin; that way in which I sometimes sit bolt upright; the way in which I spend money romantically and foolishly. … The more I learn about myself, the more I learn about him. (*Letters* 139)

Naipaul's richest source of subject matter has always been his own background, and later his experience as an immigrant and traveller. Even those of his characters who have very different life stories from Naipaul's own will share some elements of their experience and sensibility with their author: they will be expatriates like Bobby and Linda in the story 'In a Free State', or they will be Hindu Indians, like Santosh in 'One out of Many', or even simply people who feel themselves detached from their social settings, like Mr Stone. In his later work, of course, he has felt the need to make his narrators as indistinguishable from himself as possible.

Naipaul's preoccupation with his own place within his fictional world, his insistence that the reader is not to be subjected to the 'bogus adventure' (Niven 163) of an invented character, ensures that his point of view is seen to be his own, and that he makes no claims for its universality or objectivity. This is, in its way, a version of what Murdoch aspires to by doing what is apparently the very opposite: making herself disappear in her work. She says, for example, that

> it is always a danger for the novelist to write a book about himself. It's like the James Bond story. The hero has his faults, but he's always successful, clever, brave and sexually attractive. … It's very dangerous. It brings all life into a single focus, peripheral characters become cardboard figures or victims of the hero. (Appleyard)

Naipaul's books 'about himself', however, avoid this danger because of his scrupulous candour: he never portrays himself as 'brave and sexually attractive', and although he is patently successful and clever, he feelingly recalls his times of failure and depression, and the peripheral characters in *The Enigma of Arrival* are not 'cardboard figures'; they are mysterious beings of whom only a small glimpse is permitted through the eyes of the narrator. The

problem Murdoch perceives with writing about oneself is the distortion of reality by fantasy, in contrast with the truth of real imagination. Naipaul himself relates much the same problem, taken to lethal extremes, with the writing of the Trinidad cult figure and murderer Abdul Malik, (later fictionalised as Jimmy Ahmed in *Guerrillas*): 'fiction never lies: it reveals the writer totally'. Malik had been encouraged to believe that he was a writer by admirers in England, and his 'primitive novel is like a pattern book, a guide to later events' ('Michael X' 67). He wrote his fantasy of power, convinced himself of its truth, then attempted to live it, with horrific consequences. Naipaul has described the act of writing as 'fraudulent' (Walcott, 'Interview' 8), and because he feels that his place in the world is not a settled thing, not something which he can take for granted, he needs to make it clear that he is a prism through which the reader's vision is distorted. His place in the world of his own writing has become an integral part of his material as a novelist.[1]

Murdoch, on the other hand, with a more secure sense of her place in the world, feels no such impulse, but instead is guided by the wish to emulate the great writers in European tradition. She wishes not to be a prism but a lens – perhaps a magnifying lens, but although she may enlarge the peculiarities of her characters, she hopes not to distort them. Writing in the first person, she naturally sometimes distorts characters through the narrator's eyes, but the distortion is in this case part of the fiction. Her narrative voice, in the third person, is highly idiosyncratic. Her narrators take an artist's delight in details. Interiors are described lavishly, with a care which shows their importance in her characterisations. Tallis's kitchen tells us a lot about Tallis's dreary, put-upon life, just as Mor's cramped suburban semi-detached house reflects his

cramped suburban marriage. This concern for particulars is part of her attempt to ensure that she remains truthful. If she imagines a character enmeshed in the details of his whole existence, it is less likely that he will become a fantasy figure. It is also less likely that he will be unfairly treated either by the author or the reader. She has no wish to write melodramas, with cardboard characters.

Lessing has paid less attention that Naipaul and Murdoch to her narrative voice; on the whole, she is a more instinctive writer than either – which is not, of course, to say that she is unaware of many of these issues, although she does not seem unduly concerned with the problems of representation some of her critics have identified in the fiction set in Africa. Her narrator is commonly a third person voice, although she has attempted a variety of impersonations in the space fiction and the novels leading up to it, and as Jane Somers she writes, as befits a diarist, in the first person. But even in *The Diaries*, when attempting to write 'in the first person about someone very different to' herself (Frick 163), someone who 'knew nothing about a kind of dryness, like a conscience, that monitors Doris Lessing whatever she writes and in whatever style' (*Diaries*, Preface 6), she sometimes lapses into the dry, cool, detached voice which so characterises her third person fiction. Janna asks her niece Jill to 'write an article about the influence of the two world wars on fashion. *I watched her face.* … She listened. *I watched her.* Strained she was, but trying' (*Diaries* 170, emphasis mine). This is thoroughly typical of Lessing: the wisdom of the old, concentrated on the young; the detachment, the notion of 'trying the idea out' on people and watching their reactions. Her narrators in the space fiction are often similarly detached but interested in the fate of lesser beings. Johor, in *Shikasta*, pities the Earthlings but can do little

to help them; even Doeg in *The Making of the Representative* feels himself superior in his strained but willing attention to Johor's message. In *The Golden Notebook*, the core novel is written in the third person, while the 'material' for this novel, the contents of the five notebooks, are in the first person. The first person is thus, in this case, used for the attempt to include the whole experience, while the third person is used for the 'conventional' novel which is shown to be leaving so much out. Her rhetorical position in her first person novels is sometimes less clear. It is not necessary for it to be explicit, as it is in diary novels like *Jane Somers* or Murdoch's *The Sea, The Sea*, or in *The Enigma of Arrival.* However, in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *The Making of the Representative*, she makes the narrator's position so enigmatic that it is virtually unimaginable, which reflects on the credibility of the narrative. On the whole, Lessing's narrative persona is knowing and dry, even when she is posing rhetorical questions. She manages to make the questions part of an impression of wisdom – her unwillingness to make pronouncements can sometimes have as strong an effect as the pronouncements she does make. She is, perhaps without intending or realising the fact, a very rhetorical writer, in the sense that she tries, quite obviously, to persuade: more so than Naipaul, who narrates his uncertainties and writes always from an earthbound point of view – the point of view being part of the narrative; or Murdoch, who sometimes allows her characters to use rhetoric, which then, commonly, trips them up.

None of these novelists is a satirist, as I have shown. Murdoch is too concerned with the individual to make the requisite broad, judgemental generalisations; Lessing makes the generalisations, but her tone is too earnest

for satire, and when she tries, it usually fails because she cannot maintain the necessary detachment and delight in absurdity; and Naipaul, although he might be said to have begun with satire – although this is a matter of opinion – has become too interested in unexpectedness, in understanding his characters and their idiosyncrasies, to write satire. Humour, of course, is another matter, and Murdoch and Naipaul both regard humour as integral to their kinds of writing, not in the sense of the novels being full of jokes or verbal wit, but in the sense of the absurdities of life cutting across the path of tragedy. Lessing said she thinks some of her writing is 'quite funny. That note of dry irony'; but then, asked if humour was important in her fiction, she replied,

> I don't know if it is important. I find a great deal comic … I find myself laughing during the day because I can't believe I actually heard what I have heard on the radio … Newspapers are really funny … the immense pomposity of them. (Upchurch 223-4)

Funniness in daily life is well portrayed in the memoir *In Pursuit of the English*, for example, and sometimes in the autobiographies, but despite the 'dry irony' in her novels, few of her fictional characters are allowed enough space to act comically – Alice in *The Good Terrorist* being, perhaps, an exception. Humour is not in her range of deliberate ethical strategies, as it is with Naipaul, who offers it to 'combat the dissatisfaction the reader will feel at something that appears to end without solace for men' (Medwick 61); or with Murdoch, who said, 'a novel which isn't at all comic is a great danger, aesthetically speaking' (Bigsby, 'Interview' 230). Critics have said of both Murdoch and Naipaul that their early humour is missing from their later books, but, although the reader may not laugh out loud so often in the later work, the comic perspective is still there, the absurdities and contradictions of life

viewed from a slight distance, whereas Lessing is usually too close to her characters to maintain that perspective. The 'dry irony' belongs more often to the character than the writer.

Choosing the appropriate form for each novel is extremely important to all three novelists. Murdoch is the most committed to the conventional novel form, but has frequently described a struggle with the form, whose 'satisfaction … is such that it can stop one from going more deeply into the contradictions or paradoxes or more painful aspects of the subject matter' (Kermode, 'House of Fiction' 63). This is, in her view, not a new problem, but is rather something that the great novelists have always dealt with, and that will always betray the lesser. However, she sees the society of the nineteenth century as a more hospitable one for the novelist, because of certainties that we have now lost, and also because of the increase in self-consciousness in the modern period which makes it 'difficult to write as they did without an element of pastiche' (Magee 535). Lessing's problem with the novel is more specific to the post-war period, although she also sees it as a generic problem with the form – 'every writer's tormented … because we know that as soon as you start framing a novel, then things get left out' (Gray 115) – which was the impetus for *The Golden Notebook*. However, she believes that because 'you cannot any more get comfort from older moral certainties because something new is happening' (Bigsby, 'Need' 71), the conventional novel form as it was in the nineteenth century is now obsolete, and she has therefore made many experiments with the form to express the sensibility of the new age, which arose 'the moment you have a shot of the earth from space' (Gray 118). Many of these experiments are not absolutely new; it is their combination that is

original. She has ranged from the microcosmic to the macrocosmic, not only from novel to novel, but within several of her novels, and will use any type of writing she feels answers her purpose: fables, diaries, archives, memoirs, or even, if it seems appropriate, the conventional novel again: she says, for example, that 'what interests me about [*The Making of*] *the Representative* is that all my speculations in the "who-am-I" department are in there; you couldn't put those in an ordinary novel, but it's quite easy to put them in that type of book' (Gray 118). Her experimental period was mainly the time from *The Golden Notebook* in 1962 to *The Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* in 1983; since then she has written more in the traditional 'microcosmic' realist mode. After the space fiction, she seems to have accepted that the macrocosmic view does, after all, have its limitations, and, given her stated belief that 'one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares' (Preface, *The Golden Notebook* 13), writing about individuals is equivalent to writing about the whole of humanity. As I have discussed, there are troubling contradictions in this view which often have adverse effects on her fiction.

For Naipaul, the imperative to 'find the correct form' for 'the material that possess you' (Burn 4) is paramount, and has led to his development of an inimitable narrative persona and style. He maintains that using a borrowed form will distort the writer's material, which in the case of his fiction is his own experience of expatriate life and his perspective on societies to which he does not feel he belongs. In this sense, because his circumstances are the product of a peculiarity in the history of the British empire – the importation to Trinidad of indentured Indian labourers after the abolition of slavery – his material is very much the result of his specific history and thus needs a

specifically developed form to express it; more generally, though, he feels that because 'the great societies that produced the great novels of the past have cracked … the novel as a form no longer carries conviction' ('Conrad's Darkness' 244). However, he considers that this problem of finding the correct form is one which has always been present to writers – indeed, Tolstoy said the same thing – and that the novel, apt though it was for 'the early people who used the fictional form … to illuminate things that the other forms couldn't do' (Schiff 148) was soon exhausted, and became a burden to later writers. The novel, though, is a protean form and can be adapted to the needs of all kinds of writers, and, although Naipaul in his later work, and Lessing in her middle period, may have felt impatient with it and wished to break away from the tradition, the tradition has contained, in its history, many such rebellions.

Ideas about justice are basic to all ethical systems, and therefore have a profound effect on the type of morality novelists imply in their work. Neither Murdoch nor Naipaul have any great confidence in justice as an absolute value. Murdoch said 'the concept of justice is a very difficult one unless you use it in a secular context … truth and love are much more fundamental concepts' (Hartill 85-6). She realises that novelists are in a sense judging their characters, while believing that it is 'difficult for the novelist to be a just judge' (Haffenden 35). She constantly tries to suppress her judgemental impulses, and feels disappointed when she does not succeed in presenting characters with sympathy, and thus disposes the reader to condemn or dislike them. Naipaul regards justice with even more suspicion, and in *Finding the Centre* wrote that the conviction 'that there was justice in the world' is 'at the root of so much human anguish and passion, and corrupts so many lives' (38). He, too,

believes that truth is a more important concept than justice: ‘I always feel that to come to some comprehension or acceptance of what is true is itself a kind of liberation’ (Medwick 61). Naipaul has generated more critical condemnation than Murdoch through the determination to be truthful, partly because Murdoch’s fictions are so plainly fictional. Naipaul has based his fiction, from the start, on thinly veiled versions of real societies, whether it is Elvira in *The Suffrage of Elvira* or Isabella in *The Mimic Men*, both based on Trinidad, or the unnamed African country in ‘In a Free State’. The criticism does not disturb him, however, because ‘unless one hears a little squeal of pain after one’s done some writing one has not really done much’ (Wheeler 44). Murdoch, on the other hand, has been occasionally criticised for making her characters too odd, but does not arouse the ‘squeal of pain’ Naipaul often does. Their differences in background have also influenced their critics. Naipaul complained in an early essay how ridiculous it would be if the criticisms made of his novels were made of an English novelist:

> Imagine a critic in Trinidad writing of *Vile Bodies*: ‘Mr Evelyn Waugh’s whole purpose is to show how funny English people are. He looks down his nose at the land of his birth. We hope that in future he writes of his native land with warm affection.’ (‘London’ 11-12)

Lessing’s background has also drawn a type of criticism of her fiction which Murdoch has avoided, once again, particularly in respect of her subject matter and her technical decisions regarding representation of Africans. Her attitude to justice is not quite as well reasoned as that of the other two novelists: although she realises the danger of the ‘pure flame of energy’ (Bertelsen 142) inspired by her sense of justice, its effect can be felt in her earnest tone and occasionally in her easy generalisations about the nature of societies. But she

still intends to write to explore a subject rather than to say ‘what ought to be happening’ (Bikman 59), and succeeds to the extent that critics like Beck can find ‘little in the way of overtly hostile judgements made by the author about her characters, only a wry, detached observation’ (66). Social criticism is, however, common in her novels, although her political views have not been dogmatic since her communist days, and even then ‘I sensed that in my books it was also a matter of another thing, a phenomenon deeper and more mysterious’ than ‘the great problems of the hour’ (Montremy 197). This is, as I have said, often a source of creative tension for her, as, when she becomes aware that she is making judgements and criticising societies, she sometimes deliberately includes an explanation in mitigation of the behaviour or situation she is criticising.

Despite Lessing’s impatience with the conventional forms of fiction, she has no objection to using symbolism, and will use the ‘old hoary symbols’ (Tomalin 174) when she believes they will be effective. Murdoch is more cautious about symbolism, and, where it occurs in her novels, would prefer it to be seen as a part of a character’s point of view rather than the author’s, and regards it as a fault if ‘fantasy and realism are visible and separate aspects in a novel’ (Hobson). Naipaul is similarly cautious, and dislikes plays ‘where people are in a way symbols’ (Hamilton 19). He believes that it can be ‘fraudulent’ to ‘try to devise a story to get some kind of symbol for your experience’ (Hamilton 17), although symbols can grow out of ‘instinct and through dreams and all kinds of senses’ (Bryden, ‘The Novelist V.S. Naipaul’ 4). Because, for Murdoch and Naipaul, individuals are of greater intrinsic importance than for Lessing, they are less interested in using symbols to make

generalisations. Symbolism may arise naturally for them, but they are wary of allowing it to carry too much weight in their fiction.

The readership which each of these novelists attracts is rather disturbingly affected by the way they are able to be categorised. Lessing has gained and lost readers throughout her varied career, for example when those who regarded her as a realist writer on women's issues were antagonised by her space fiction and refused to read it. Naipaul attributes his long period of comparative obscurity to the fact that readers labelled him according to his background instead of taking him on his merits: he has also, not entirely unwittingly or unwillingly, antagonised many of those who are interested in post-colonial literature with his refusal to ignore 'what is disagreeable' (Kakutani) in developing countries: Lessing, also, is impatient with the propensity of people, for example, 'to see the race feelings as if they're confined to Southern Africa … that the problem is that the whites want to enslave the blacks and that's the end of it' because by doing that 'you're overlooking a great deal else' (Bertelsen 125), and with the kind of criticism attitudes like this engender.

Each of these three authors has shown, by their extensive published self-commentary throughout their careers, their serious and distinctive approaches to the ethical problems they have discovered in the writing of fiction. For each of them there have arisen tensions in their attempts to solve these problems, which to have a greater or lesser extent fed into their creative processes. For Murdoch, the most productive of these tensions is between her philosophical ideas and their inadequacy to the problems which she makes her characters face in her novels. Rupert in *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* is the

clearest example of the dramatisation of this inadequacy, but it can also be seen in Mor's difficulties in *The Sandcastle*, in the increasing problems of the procession of wives in the novels of male adultery face with their attempts to be good, and with Bradley's self-deceptions in *The Black Prince*. The fact that she has always denied being a philosophical novelist is interesting, but does not detract from the fact that her philosophy, perhaps unconsciously, is constantly put to the test in her novels. There are other tensions she is more conscious of, as well; for example, the tension between the dramatic form of the novel and the absurd and contingent nature of the reality she is trying to portray, between fantasy and imagination, and between open and closed novels, and these are related to her loyalty to what she saw as the great qualities of the form. Her loyalty to this ideal, and her modesty in trying to attain it, may have prevented her from having the courage to adapt the form to suit her own talents in the way Lessing and Naipaul have.

Lessing's clearest creative tensions are perhaps more troubling, as they seem to arise from a failure to subject her beliefs to critical analysis. She tries to reconcile concepts like determinism and free will, and the value of the individual versus the group, by assertion rather than by argument, and sometimes she appears to ignore the inconsistencies altogether. Lack of courage is not her problem: she has never hesitated to try a new way if the old one has stopped working for her. In 'Hunger' she tried to present a simple story, but in this case her instinct for complexity and ambiguity rescued it from a damaging simplicity: she saw through 'the great questions of the age' to 'a phenomenon deeper and more mysterious' (Montremy 197). On the other hand, *Memoirs of a Survivor* is damaged by its assumption that all experience

is common to all, which is contradicted by the individual experiences it describes. And in the space fiction, her implicit assumption of superiority over the human race taints the series, together with the assertion that the welfare of the group – the community, the race, the universe – is more important than the welfare of individuals, while there is a welcome reassertion of the value and interest of individual lives implied in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* and the subsequent fiction, even though her persistent belief in the commonality of experience has continued to dull her characterisation.

Naipaul, of the three, has brought the ethical problems he perceives most firmly under his control. He found difficulties in writing about his observations of a life he did not understand, and he therefore began to write directly and concretely about his own background, and produced *A House for Mr Biswas* before the age of thirty. He wanted to express a sense of lostness and exile, not specific to one race or situation, and so he wrote *In a Free State* in five parts, dramatising a variety of sensibilities, all affected by post-colonial disorder. He found difficulties and contradictions with inventing narrators and putting them in the situations he wanted to write about: he therefore, in *The Enigma of Arrival*, made his narrator scrupulously himself to avoid falsity. He has had the penetration and self-awareness to find solutions to the ethical problems he has encountered, and the courage to carry them through. The creative tension, the impulse which has fuelled his career, is, as Michener says, ‘the opposing pull’ of the wish for ‘withdrawal from the fray’ and ‘the fear of giving in’ (73), and the mixture of fascination and disgust which fixes his attention on what he finds most unpleasant.

Although each of these novelists places truthfulness high on their scale of values as artists, their approaches are, as I have shown, in many ways different. All artists must solve their own dilemmas in their own ways: to recommend Naipaul's steely vision to Murdoch, or Murdoch's tolerant, ambiguous and comic approach to Lessing, is to misunderstand this basic fact. That they have all succeeded in some measure is clear from the interest they have each aroused among readers. Almost all of their novels are still in print and of interest to the critical community, and if they are not universally admired or understood, it is necessary to remember Lessing's admission, in the Preface to *The Golden Notebook*, that 'the book is alive and potent and fructifying and able to promote thought and discussion *only* when its plan and shape and intention are not understood' (21), and that, as Kermode writes, 'the only works we value enough to call classic are those which, and they demonstrate by surviving, are complex and indeterminate enough to allow us our necessary pluralities' (*Classic* 121).

All the same, their approaches to identifying and tackling the ethical problems they have perceived in writing fiction have had clear consequences in their work. Murdoch had the education and discipline needed to develop a philosophy of fiction, but her devotion to the Platonic ideal of the great artist – perhaps, in the end, her humility – prevented her from being bold and egotistical enough to recognise that the ideal did not entirely suit her talents, and that she should be a little more experimental with the form, and in consequence she found that 'one's ability to improve is … extraordinarily limited' (Biles 122). Lessing does not lack the egotism, but her impatience with formal education and suspicion of rationality means that her experiments

with a vast range of forms have never resulted in a coherent, credible vision. Naipaul, partly through his own unusual background, highly educated yet not culturally secure, has been compelled to analyse very carefully his own needs as an artist, and has had the intelligence to develop the forms which have suited those needs as his career has progressed, a process of self-fashioning which has not pleased everyone, but which has allowed him to write such brilliant yet different novels as *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Enigma of Arrival*. Neither Lessing nor Murdoch have developed progressively through their writing careers as Naipaul has, Lessing because she would not look critically enough at the beliefs on which she based her novelistic world, and Murdoch because she was trying to attain the impossible by emulating other artists and their forms. Modesty and humility are admirable qualities, but it may be that Murdoch was too well endowed with them to become a truly great novelist. Irrationality and lack of self-criticism are less attractive, and when combined with the egotism of the artist, as in Lessing's case, they can cause some grandiose failures. Naipaul alone of the three has the necessary egotism combined with the self-critical and analytical skills to achieve the courage and truthfulness of the great writer.

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[1]However, as a travel writer, he claims 'I travel not to write about myself but to look at the world' (Rashid, 'Last Lion' 166).

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